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## **ABSTRACT**

Jewish humor is a well-known, if ill-defined genre. The prevalence and success of Jewish comedians has been a point of pride for American Jews throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What I undertake in this dissertation is to isolate one particular form of humor—namely satire—and use it as a way to analyze the changing relationship of American Jews to traditional religious forms. I look at the trends over three generations, the third generation (who came of age in the 40s and 50s), the Baby Boom generation (who came of age in the 60s and 70s) and the contemporary generation (who came of age in the 80s and 90s). When the satire produced by each generation is analyzed with the depiction of Judaism and Jewish practices in mind a certain pattern emerges. By then reading that pattern through Bill Brown's Thing Theory it becomes possible to talk about the motivations for and effects of the change over time in a new way. What the analysis revealed is that the third generation related to Judaism as a Thing, which in Brownian terms means it no longer functioned. Some, like Woody Allen and Joseph Heller actively promulgated that way of breaking free from the shackles of piety. Others, like Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud saw the turning of Judaism into a Thing as establishing dangerous precedents for inter-Jewish relationships. The Baby Boom generation lacked their own take on the turning of Judaism into a Thing; early on they matched the third generation, later they matched the contemporary generation. And the contemporary generation, rather than being content with the Judaism-Thing they inherited reversed the process, injecting new life and new purpose into Jewish practices in their texts.

**All Joking Aside: The Role of Religion in American Jewish Satire**

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## CHAPTER 1: THE STATE OF THE ART

The wise man went to that country. The wise man made up his mind that he had to know the essence of the country. And how could he know the essence of the country? By the country's jokes. Because when one has to know something, one should know the jokes related to it.

—Nachman of Bratslav<sup>1</sup>

Jews and humor seem to go together like peas and carrots, like peanut butter and jelly, like Burns and Allen. Perhaps it has always been that way, though (as I will discuss in the pages to come) I do not necessarily think so. Somewhere along the way, through their long and winding road, Jews got funny. Not just in an ontological sense, but in a way that was noticeable from the outside, and was a point of pride from the inside. So while this relationship did not appear suddenly, when *Time* magazine published its now-famous 1978 article “Behavior: Analyzing Jewish Comics” which claimed, among other things, that 80% of the working comedians in America were Jewish (despite Jews being then 3% of the general population) it both came as a shock to people, and also confirmed something people had long known, but had not had quantified for them.

In the wake of that article “Jewish humor” became something people wanted to study, but that is a tricky thing to do. First of all, what makes humor Jewish? Sigmund Freud began asking this question all the way back in 1905, and nearly a century later Rabbi Joseph Telushkin was still asking the same question. Does a joke have to be by

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<sup>1</sup> Nachman of Bratslav, “The Humble King,” in *Nachman of Bratslav: The Tales*, trans. A. Brand, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, ed. Richard J. Payne (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 117.

Jews, for Jews to qualify (this is Freud's view)? Telushkin thought a joke just needs "Jewish sensibilities" to qualify. Popularly any joke (or film, or novel) by a Jewish comedian gets labeled "Jewish," but when the definition is that broad, does it mean anything? Over the course of this dissertation I will not be proposing a new rubric for determining the Jewishness of a cultural artifact. What I will be proposing is a new way of viewing the changes in American Jewish satire over roughly three generations.

This will primarily involve looking at the way the so-called "third generation" of American Jews, namely those born in the 1920s and 1930s, turn Judaism into a "Thing." Thing, in this context, is more than just a vague identifier. Using Bill Brown's Thing Theory, which I will explain in greater detail below, I am using Thing to mean something broken, abandoned, or no longer useful. So the majority of this dissertation is predicated on identifying the way three successive generations of satirists relate to Judaism. For the third generation, I will argue, the Judaism-Thing became a sort of rubber ball that could be tossed around as needed and bounced off of walls in the service of a joke.

This rubber ball then became the primogeniture of contemporary satirists who saw it, like so many aspects of their grandparents' generation, in a very different light. What they are doing with the ball right now, in today's world, runs a gamut of emotional and cultural modes. To some extent, this is why I am dealing with "satire" in this work and not the broader category of "humor." Not all humor is satiric, and not all satire is humorous, though the latter is closer to being true. I am using a definition of satire similar to that of Ziva Ben-Porat, which Linda Hutcheon uses in her *A Theory of Parody* (to be discussed in Chapter 2). Ben-Porat says satire is "a critical representation, always comic

and often caricatural.”<sup>2</sup> But in using satire as a delimiting factor I can concern myself with works that are focused on satirizing or dissecting some aspect of Jewish life, which avoids the need to define the work itself as Jewish. Freud (who will be discussed at length below) argued that jokes must have a purpose (though the underlying impetus for joking may well be latent, or subconscious), and for a satiric joke the purpose is self-evident: satire. My operating definition of Jewish satire relies on that notion of purpose. Satire, as will be discussed in chapter two, must be anchored in reality because it is the real world, or in this case real Judaism or Jews that is being satirized. What constitutes “real,” however, is not so clear. Many of these satires are approaching a Judaism that is real by virtue of its existing in the collective imagination, which may or may not be terribly related to the really real Judaism actually being practiced in America. All stereotypes come from some kernel of truth, but though recognizable they are also frequently to some degree false. Whether really real or only a simulacrum of reality, the *subject* or *target* of the satire in this dissertation is Jewish (or in many of the cases I am discussing, Judaism) and that qualifies it for this study.

I should note, however, that although Jewish humor is a popular topic, it is not universally accepted that it actually exists. Mel Brooks, one of the cornerstones of American humor (Jewish or otherwise) once said, “You got it wrong. It’s not really Jewish comedy — there are traces of it, but it is really New York comedy, urban comedy,

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<sup>2</sup> I will be discussing Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody* in Chapter 2, but for now suffice it to say that I am largely using her understanding of satire as “a critical representation, always comic and often caricatural” (Ziva Ben-Porat, “Method in Madness: Notes on the Structure of Parody, Based on MAD TV Satires,” *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1/2 [Autumn 1979]: 247, quoted in Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, First Illinois Paperback Edition [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000], 49).

street-corner comedy. It's not Jewish comedy — that's from Vilna, that's Poland.”<sup>3</sup>

Brooks sees *Jewish* comedy as being something from “over there,” while “over here” the humor is not Jewish, in his eyes. Along the same vein, American Studies scholar Allen Guttman claims that “there really is no such thing as ‘Jewish humor’” because the Bible, “the greatest of Jewish books... is scarcely typified by elements of comedy.”<sup>4</sup>

Guttman's argument against Jewish humor is, in part, that:

If the term refers to some form of humor which has been characteristic of Jews from the time of Moses to the day of Moshe Dayan, then clearly the term has no referent at all. There *is*, on the other hand, a kind of humor which is common to the great Yiddish writers of the nineteenth century and to many Jewish-American authors in the twentieth century. This kind of humor is not, however, the result of Judaism as a religion and cannot be traced to the experience of Biblical Jews.<sup>5</sup>

The first part of his argument is clearly hyperbole, because if something must be consistent from Moses to Moshe Dayan in order to be considered Jewish then there is not, of course, a religion, culture, language, practice, or belief that could properly be called Jewish. But I wish to focus on the end of his argument in which he claims that this thing we are calling “Jewish humor” is not “the result of Judaism as a religion.” Although Guttman does not define what he means by either “Judaism” or “religion” the context of his larger essay indicates it is some sort of nexus of rituals, practices, life cycle events, and, texts. Defining terms is the perpetual rabbit hole down which most academic discussions eventually fall, but Guttman's definition of religion seems largely practical, and for the purposes of this study religion will be defined as something that involves both

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<sup>3</sup> Danielle Berrin, “Mel Brooks and Philip Roth on Jewishness and Love,” *Jewish Journal*, 15 January 2013, online at <[http://www.jewishjournal.com/hollywoodjew/item/mel\\_brooks\\_and\\_philip\\_roth\\_on\\_jewishness\\_work\\_and\\_love](http://www.jewishjournal.com/hollywoodjew/item/mel_brooks_and_philip_roth_on_jewishness_work_and_love)> (accessed 5 March 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Allen Guttman, “Jewish Humor,” in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Luis D. Rubin, Jr. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 329.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

beliefs and practices, and Judaism will be considered a religion using that definition. I prefer to use a definition of religion that sits somewhere between the classic functional reductionists (Durkheim, Freud) and the cultural anthropologists (Geertz, Evans-Pritchard). Religion has a role in social and cultural development, but that is not all religion is reducible to. Using this definition is not intended to limit what constitutes either religion or Judaism, but to have a stable understanding of the terms that is true to the way satirists and critics alike are using them.

Although I disagree with the way Guttman defines Judaism for the purpose of discrediting the concept of Jewish humor, he does highlight the difficulty that arises from the arbitrariness of labels. The separation of “Jewish” and “American” in the identity marker “Jewish-American” is a tenuous thing; both must exist in close to equal measure to make the label work. Ken Koltun-Fromm asks the question: “In what sense is material Jewish identity in America a specifically Jewish or American expression?”<sup>6</sup> Shaul Magid asks a similar series of questions: “How much ‘America’ is in American Judaism? How much ‘Jewishness’ is in America? How much has ‘Jewishness’ changed in contemporary America? And how much has America changed?”<sup>7</sup> To find the answers to these questions, or to be able to identify Jewish satire separate from the shared American immigration experience of many cultures we have to isolate the aspects of it that could not exist without Judaism. American and Jewish identities have often battled in the lives of American Jews. Norman Leer once wrote that “America’s home-made moral system of rational pragmatism does battle with a weaker, but more ancient and durable

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 270.

<sup>7</sup> Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1.

adversary, traditional Judaism.”<sup>8</sup> American Jews have spent generations trying to bring these two adversaries to a peaceful resolution. I think it is important, because it is reflective, if not causal of contemporary trends, not only that there is such a thing as “Jewish humor,” but also that the particular sub-set of American Jewish humor is just as much Jewish as it is American.

In the following introductory pages I am going to lay out my theory about the way Jewish satire and American Judaism have interacted over the last half a century. I will explain why current scholarship on Jewish humor has failed to address this interaction, and why much current scholarship on Jewish humor has, in fact, gone in the wrong direction entirely. To support these claims I will describe in some detail some of the major ideas of Humor Theory that both undergird my study, and also explain why I think so much of the available scholarship on Jewish humor misses the mark. I will also explain the way a much newer theoretical model, “Thing Theory” informs the specific claims I am making about the use and abuse of Judaism in satiric works. Other methodological tools, such as Literary Criticism and Ritual Theory will be situated in the chapters to follow.

My theory is this: World War II was the watershed event that drew a generational line in the sand for American Jewish satirists. Clearly, World War II changed many things for many people, perhaps none more so as a group than Jews. Deborah Dash Moore has written extensively about American Jewish identity during and after the war, and she said, “the mobilization of the United States for war catapulted American Jews into a radically different world from the one they had known. As the world of home

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<sup>8</sup> Dan Isaac, “In Defense of Philip Roth,” *Chicago Review* 17 (1964): 96.

receded, their identities shifted from ‘New Yorker’ to ‘American.’ American Jewishness developed legs.”<sup>9</sup> Primarily this shift had to do with the breakdown of the ethnic enclave-type neighborhood, and American Jews buying into the “melting pot” of the American Dream. Though the aftermath of the War began immediately, the emotional and intellectual impact took years, even decades to sink in. The term “Holocaust” did not gain traction until the 1960s. Culturally and communally it took time for the full impact of the Nazi genocide to settle over American Jews in particular, many of whom had little direct connection with the War or its victims. Zachary Braiterman argued that the post-Holocaust thought of the 1960s formed, “a new theological discourse in which the memory of Auschwitz and the State of Israel virtually displace God and Torah.”<sup>10</sup> The core touchstones of Jewish identity shifted in the 1960s. I see this relating to the satiric output of American Jews in important ways.

There is a generational divide between the satirists and comedians who were born before the war and those born after it. What this dissertation is going to argue, and illustrate, is that the generation who lived through the war (for the remainder of this document this generation will be referred to as “the third generation,” following the dating used by Will Herberg in “Protestant, Catholic, Jew” and Nathan Glazer in *American Judaism*) emerged as adult satirists with a certain set of understandings of, and priorities about, Jews and Judaism.

Judaism in the 1950s was largely in transition. As will be discussed at greater length in chapter 4, the late 1940s and especially the 1950s witnessed the great Jewish migration to the area of third settlement—the suburbs. Some of these previously closed

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<sup>9</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *G.I. Jews*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 162.

communities were allowing Jews and other minorities to buy in for the first time, but in many cases these were brand new neighborhoods and subdivisions being built to capitalize on the post-war increase in American wealth as well as the Baby Boom (see chapter 3). The impact on American Judaism was that it began to resemble what Will Herberg calls, “the original moderate Reform program,” even though these changes were not being driven by the Reform Movement itself.<sup>11</sup> Whereas the Second Generation had been comfortable with the idea of “ethnicity” uniting Jews, the Third Generation, in a post-Holocaust, post-Israel world relied more on the idea of “peoplehood.” “What resulted,” Herberg writes, “was substantially similar to moderate Reform, but since it had not come about through direct Reform influence, but rather through the continuing pressure of the American environment, it was not recognized as having any relation to the older Reform idea.”<sup>12</sup> So while the Conservative Movement became the dominant congregational form, American Jews across national and demographic lines began to adopt aspects of the old Reform model, i.e. focusing on the idea of communal identity as a unifying force, and downplaying the role of organized religion.

The antiestablishment counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s in turn produced a couple of primary themes: religion (including Judaism) is flawed, outdated, or corrupt and therefore needs to be lampooned and shown to be ridiculous whenever possible and the Jewish people (as a corporate unit, not necessarily individual Jews), who had survived so much for so long, was important, valuable, and worth protecting. In the “Torah, God, and Israel” triad Israel was put on a pedestal, to some level, far above Torah and God. This is a generation that grew up in the wake of Mordecai Kaplan’s *Judaism as a*

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<sup>11</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 194.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



*Civilization*, and that same Kaplanic notion that the cultural or national identity of Judaism needed to be protected above the religious forms is clearly reflected in this type of satire. Nathan Glazer pointed out in *American Judaism* that, “in the years between 1920 and 1940 [i.e. the Second Generation], the areas of second settlement contained the greatest number of American Jews, and it was in this zone of American Jewish life that the pattern of the future was being developed. The future, it then seemed, would see the rapid dissolution of the Jewish religion.”<sup>13</sup> The handwriting on the wall seemed to portend the transition from Judaism as a religion to Judaism as a civilization, and the young Jews who grew up in that period very much absorbed that mentality. They produced at least 2 decades’ worth of satire that reduced Judaism to its rituals or belief system and turned it into that useful, useless rubber ball they could bounce off of various surfaces or situations to create the comedic or satiric effect they desired.

When today’s generation (for the remainder of this document referred to as the “contemporary generation”) got their hands on the ball they were not sure what they wanted to do with it, but they knew stickball in the street was not their game. They were raised in an America where, especially for Jews in the more liberal branches, attending the opening of a new Woody Allen movie was an act of communal significance at least as “religiously” real as a JCC Purim carnival. It was a way to get together with other Jews and celebrate one of your co-religionist heroes. It has become a well-known story in the study of Jewish humor that in 1996 a Manhattan Day School affiliated with the Conservative Movement asked their students to name their Jewish heroes. The results

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<sup>13</sup> Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 84-85.

were, in order: Jerry Seinfeld, Adam Sandler, Howard Stern, God.<sup>14</sup> The line between religion and culture becomes increasingly blurry when religion itself seems to be a cultural object. This is how the rubber ball bounces down the line, generation to generation. But that is all public sentiment. And public sentiment, as we know, is generally going to be the opposite of what satirists are doing, because it is the comfortable, complacent public that satire is usually trying to stir up.

So that, I am proposing, is why the contemporary generation tries to take the rubber ball back apart. They see what has been handed down; they see Jewish peoplehood on its pedestal while Jewish rituals and traditions are scuffed and dusty from being bounced around, and they try to reverse that order. They take what they have been given by the previous generation and, in true satiric fashion, decide to do just the opposite. They, while still being tongue in cheek, nevertheless treat the texts and rituals of Judaism with a little more care and a little more respect than those who came before them. They echo the classic canard, “To the Jews as a nation, nothing.” This generation did not have the same experience as the one who lived through World War II, so while they were not ignorant of the Holocaust, it impacted their work differently. They felt no compunction about depicting Jews in a negative light; in fact, their satire was most sharply honed at Jewish social and cultural patterns of behavior, not the archaic nature or institutional shortcomings of Jewish ritual forms.

In order to illustrate this shift I am going to use examples from both the third generation and contemporary generation grouped around similar topics. In each chapter I will show examples of how the third generation reified and made Judaism into a Thing

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<sup>14</sup> Lisa Lipkin, “Long Live American Heroes: God Places Fourth Behind Seinfeld, Sandler and Howard Stern,” *Forward*, 22 November 1996, 13.

(as opposed to “objectified it,” which I will explain further below), while the contemporary generation took Judaism more seriously and saved their harshest critique for Jews themselves. There is, of course, overlap and gray area. If this were actually a clear and impermeable boundary I would not be the first person to point it out. But I maintain, and will argue, that even the overlap shows evidence of this process. When Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud excoriate the American Jewish community, as I analyze in Chapter 4, for example, they are using the treatment of European Jewish immigrants as a way to introduce a broader critique of American Jewish cultural conformism in the post-War years, and therefore it is entirely consonant with the relation to Jewish peoplehood vis à vis the war I am proposing. And when *Seinfeld* lampoons a bris in Chapter 3, you can see the ways in which one of the few prominent comedians from the “in-between” generation oscillated between both generational approaches.

The missing, “in-between” generation is the Baby Boom generation born between 1945 and 1969. That generation will be discussed at greater length in chapter 3, but they had different pressures than either the generation before or after them. Early Baby Boom satire seems to most closely resemble the third generation, while recent Baby Boom satire looks more like the contemporary generation. They came of age during the period of which Glazer says, “the Jewish community became remarkably homogenous in its social composition.”<sup>15</sup> This generation grew up in the world depicted by Roth and Malamud in chapter 4, a world in which a rush towards perceived assimilation seemed to the third generation to prove their point about the vestigial nature of traditional Judaism, and showed the contemporary generation the spiritual void they wished to fill. Shaul Magid

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<sup>15</sup> Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 107.

called this period “post-halakhic pietism,” which highlights its unique blend of religious liberties taken alongside a developing identity fundamentalism.<sup>16</sup> Though they are hard to define, and in many ways don’t have an identity of their own, the Baby Boom generation is one of the most identifiable in American cultural life, so it is important to position them relative to the generation before and after the Baby Boom. The liminality of the Baby Boom shows that while my theory in the chapters to come is by no means totalizing, and there will always be exceptions, it is proposing a new way of reading these satires that charts the movement of Judaism-as-Thing through the American Jewish experience, and that new reading can change the narrative about American Jewish religious lives.

### **Current Scholarship on Jewish Humor**

A great deal has been written about Jewish humor. An Amazon.com search for the phrase will yield over 3,400 results. Many of them are actually just humorous books on Jewish topics, such as *How to Raise a Jewish Dog* or *Haikus for Jews*. Many of the remaining results are collections of jokes, like Novak and Waldoks’ classic *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, Spalding’s *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor* or Minkoff’s *Oy: The Ultimate Book of Jewish Jokes*. Those tend to be standard joke books, meaning that they contain little to no analysis or scholarship on the jokes or the joke form. There are, however, several works of scholarly interest on the phenomenon of Jewish humor. I am going to focus on six contemporary treatments of the subject as a way of illustrating the trends in the current scholarship, many of which I will be opposing in the remainder of this

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<sup>16</sup> Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2013), 111.

dissertation. In chronological order these books are: Sarah Blacher Cohen's *Jewish Wry* (1987), Joseph Telushkin's *Jewish Humor* (1992), Lawrence Epstein's *The Haunted Smile* (2001, and the only other book specifically on American Jewish humor), Leonard Greenspoon's *Jews and Humor* (2009), Ruth Wisse's *No Joke* (2013) and Hershey and Linda Friedman's *God Laughed* (2014).<sup>17</sup> My goal is not to make a straw man out of any of these books or authors, but only to demonstrate where the conversation on Jewish humor is, and where I think it still needs to go.

I am going to say a bit about the general books on Jewish humor first, and then I will turn to Epstein's volume at the end of this section. The general books share three trends, all of which I see as major problems when combined with some of the tenets of Humor Theory. The problems are that they conflate 1) time, 2) geography, and that they subsequently flatten 3) cultural specificity. As is evident in Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (which will be discussed at greater length below) jokes are highly specific. Freud and others have shown that this is true of almost all jokes, but I argue that it is even truer of satiric humor. It is possible (though unlikely) that everyone, everywhere, across time would find someone slipping on a banana peel or tripping over a footstool funny. All people fall down, so perhaps all people laugh when other people fall down. But the further you get from broad, physical, and most importantly *non-verbal* humor the more difficult it becomes for jokes to travel successfully from one place or time to another. This becomes particularly important when discussing Jewish humor.

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<sup>17</sup> Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is also of great importance, but it exists more as a cornerstone of Humor Theory today than as an example of where modern scholarship of Jewish humor has gone. As such it will be treated at length later in this Introduction when I deal with Humor Theory.

What we consider “funny” changes dramatically over time. The first century Roman philosopher Cicero provided what is one of our oldest extant analyses of comedy (the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics* was about comedy, but it is lost).<sup>18</sup> He considered good comedy to be verbal or witty, and wrote that physical humor or mimicry were low forms. Baldassarre Castiglione used Cicero’s categories when he wrote about comedy in the early sixteenth century, reasserting that mimicry was coarse, and that making fun of people of good birth was to be avoided. By the late sixteenth century, however, we have ample evidence of mockery becoming a common form of comedy, even of those of the highest birth, such as the portrayal of the real Prince Henry (Hal) and his fictional wingman Falstaff. But even where Shakespeare seems modern in some ways, he shows how comedy continues to change in others. Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* was considered a comedy in his day. It ends with a wedding and with the central lovers all happily ever after. It also ends with the humiliation and forced conversion to Christianity of Shylock. *Merchant* is rarely produced anymore except as a vehicle for a big-name actor to take on Shylock, and as such it is really never staged as a comedy, but instead as a vehicle for exploring the trauma and tragedy of Shylock’s psyche. Older comedies usually need to be made over with modern sensibilities in order to be successful with modern audiences. Aristophanes can be made both contemporary and funny, but in its original form we have trouble grasping the humor. Even Moliere must be updated in most cases, because audiences have lost their appetite for bawdy comedy that often relies on the abuse or even rape of women for a laugh. Tossing the fair maiden over your shoulder

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<sup>18</sup> Jan Brenner and Herman Roodenberg, *A Cultural History of Humor* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997) 4.

and dragging her off to bed might have been good for a laugh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but not today.

Telushkin, Greenspoon, and Friedman all try to cover the entire history of the Jewish people in their books, a very questionable endeavor indeed. They all have chapters or essays referring back to either the Mishna and Talmud (Telushkin and Greenspoon) or back to the Bible (Friedman). In order to contextualize so many different historical periods a book would need significant information on each time, other examples of humor, research on what was considered funny or satiric in that age, and why. Otherwise you are operating under an assumption that humor is stable across time, which it very clearly is not.

Furthermore, language is perhaps the most important key to oral or written humor. In 1973 Dan Ben-Amos argued that if, as Freud suggested, one of the things that make Jewish humor “Jewish” is a reliance on self-critique then there is no such thing as Jewish humor after all. But he does highlight other characteristics of the humor of Jews that could be potentially seen as unifying themes, and one of those is the way language is used. Jews, especially Ashkenazi Jews, have considered it a part of their history to be outsiders, especially linguistically. Whether in Europe or America, the legacy of Yiddish was that it marked those who spoke it as being outside the mainstream. For some that was a point of pride, for others it was something of which they were ashamed, and they worked to master the vernacular. What Ben-Amos points out is that this linguistic mash-up is often found in Jewish humor.

Ben-Amos refers to these as “dialect jokes” in which “narrators add comic effect by speaking the new language with the intonation and vocal system of the old

language.”<sup>19</sup> He sees this as a vestige of European anti-Semitism; a mean-spirited or “tendentious” (to use Freud’s term) joke that mocks Jews’ inability to correctly master the vernacular. The most common version of this is the “shm-reduplication,” in which a word is repeated, but its first phoneme is replaced with “shm,” such as “Joe Shmoe,” or “dissertation shmissertation.” Shm-reduplication is generally thought to have arisen from Yiddish speakers, and made its way into English in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because English and Yiddish share Germanic linguistic roots this reduplication works well, whereas it does not work as well in Yiddish transitions to Romance languages.<sup>20</sup> So while Ben-Amos may be correct that there is an anti-Semitic root for humor that seems to mock the language skills of the speaker, the shm-reduplication has become a commonly-known American speech pattern today not because of residual anti-Semitism in America, but because Yiddish speakers brought the pattern, and then found that it worked well in English as well.

So what does this have to do with the problems in existing Jewish humor scholarship? This is just one example of why it is very difficult, if not impossible, to discuss humor both across time and across language barriers. We all know that when you try to explain a joke you invariably kill it, and what is the translation of a joke other than an explanation? When something as small and specific as the phoneme “shm” can be an integral part of what makes a joke work, how can you possibly expect it to work across different language families? This is the problem that Blacher Cohen, Wisse, Telushkin, Greenspoon, and Friedman all share; they all include chapters about humor from a variety

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<sup>19</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor,” *Western Folklore* 32, no. 2 (1973): 124.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Nevins and Bert Vaux, “Metalinguistic, Shmetalinguistic: The Phonology of Shm-Reduplication,” in *Papers from the 39th Annual Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society*, ed. J. Cihlar, A. Franklin, D. Kaiser, I. Kimbara (2003), 702-721.



of language families, but all translated into English as though the linguistically-specific qualities of humor are simple and self-evident. The problem of translating jokes is similar to that of translating poetry; you can either translate accurately and lose the art, or keep the “spirit” of the original but rework it into the new language, but it is nearly impossible to do both.

Finally, and most importantly for satire, this conflation of space and time also leads to a flattening of cultural specificity. Satire is culturally specific, so while none of the other books mentioned are focused on satire, their flattening of culture makes them unstable models for this study. Telushkin, Greenspoon, Wisse, and Blacher Cohen’s books all span the globe, including examples from Eastern Europe before World War II, America after World War II, and Israel. The cultural settings of Jews in those three situations could not be more different, so both their jokes and their satires are going to reflect those vast differences. American Jews may be outsiders, but their experience is not remotely similar to Jews in Nazi-era Poland or Soviet-era Russia. And neither can really even conceive of what it would mean to be a majority or in power, which is what Israeli humor reflects. Both Greenspoon and Blacher Cohen include essays comparing American Jewish humor to African American humor, and that actually may be a more apt and accurate comparison than Jews across space and time to each other.

For all these reasons the abovementioned five volumes, while useful in providing certain examples of Jewish humor, do not adequately contextualize humor and cannot, therefore, address the questions I am addressing here. Lawrence Epstein’s *The Haunted Smile*, focused as it is on “The Story of Jewish Comedians in America,” does not fall victim to the trap of trying to cover too much, but it nevertheless also falls short of what I

am trying to accomplish. Epstein's book is primarily too superficial and too ready to chalk all humor up to psychology. Epstein's thesis is, "the story of Jewish comedians in America is one of triumph and success. But their stage smile is tinged with a sadness. It is haunted by the Jewish past, by the deep strains in American Jewish life—the desire to be accepted and the concern for a culture disappearing—by the centuries of Jewish life too frequently interrupted by hate,, and by the knowledge that too often for Jewish audiences a laugh masked a shudder."<sup>21</sup> Overall Epstein sees American Jewish humor as being fairly unidirectional in terms of cause and effect. Bad things happen in the lives of Jews as individuals and The Jews as a people, and that forms the psychology of the people we know as comedians.

He claims, for example, that one "crucial common element for many Jewish comedians was having a weak father who was fundamentally a failure in the New World and a strong, intelligent, ambitious mother."<sup>22</sup> This may be true, but it establishes the early pioneers of comedy as very passive. They are acted upon, and what they produce is a direct result of their past. Such a large part of what I am arguing is a forward-looking analysis of what comedy and satire *did*, not what was done to them. What Epstein does not do enough of, and what I am trying to do, is think about the legacy of Jewish humor and the way that Jewish humor and Judaism interact. Yiddish language forms and the "Jewish sensibilities" Telushkin describes (anti-Semitism, professional success, verbal aggression, and assimilation) may be aspects of how we identify a joke as Jewish, but there is so much more to the way satirists have shaped American understandings of what it means to be Jewish.

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<sup>21</sup> Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), x.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

## Humor Theory

For the remainder of this introduction I am going to lay out the basics of the two major methodological models that have shaped the majority of my analysis to come. They are Humor Theory and Thing Theory. Humor Theory is a large, broad category that draws heavily from psychology and philosophy in order to think about why we laugh, how we laugh, and at what we laugh. The three seminal works of Humor Theory I will discuss further in the pages to come are Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Henri Bergson's "On Laughter," and D. H. Monroe's *Argument of Laughter*. Humor Theory and Thing Theory both concern themselves, to some degree, with the life of an item. In Humor Theory that item is a joke and in Thing Theory the item can be anything that has lost its function, in this case Judaism. But Humor Theorists (Freud in particular) have also pointed out that jokes are not accidental (there are funny accidents, but those are not jokes); jokes must be intentional, and intent means there is a premeditated object of the joke. Both theories, then, help us conceptualize Judaism as a Thing, and what it means to use that Thing as the object, or butt, of a joke. And both theories will help us understand why the object of humor, particularly the institution of Judaism, shifts in both subtle and radical ways with each passing generation.

Humor Theory began as a discipline in the early twentieth century. Sigmund Freud's *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* was first published in 1905,<sup>23</sup> five years after his masterwork, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The two books were, in many ways, two parts of an ongoing discussion. Ken Frieden writes that, "according to Freud, our dreams conceal aggressive and sexual impulses that we cannot acknowledge

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<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960), xxv.

to ourselves or to other people; in telling jokes, he claims, we both express and conceal similar impulses.”<sup>24</sup> So in *Der Witz* (henceforth referred to as “*Jokes*”<sup>25</sup>), Freud combines his new dream theory with the conversation about aspects of humor people had been having for centuries. Nevertheless Freud did not immediately make joking an individual concern. Elliott Oring writes that Freud “analyzed only the techniques and thoughts underlying particular joke texts. His discussion of the motives for joking...was generic. It was never tied to the investigation of a particular case.”<sup>26</sup> What he does that is different, however, is deduce that “joke-work” is actually intimately related to “dream-work” which makes humor a part of a larger conversation rather than a self-propelled phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> So first and foremost Freud asserts that the mental process behind the crafting of humor effervesces up from the unconscious the same way dreams do; that they are on some level not under our direct control.

Freud’s second key point is to separate “jokes” from “the comic.” Freud claimed that although earlier writers had taken on explorations similar to his, “the subject of jokes lies in the background, while the main interest of their enquiry is turned to the more comprehensive and attractive problem of the comic.”<sup>28</sup> The difference, for earlier theorists such as Theodore Lipps, is that the comic is a broad category that encompasses both organic and synthetic sources of humor. Jokes, Lipps says, are “‘subjective’—that

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<sup>24</sup> Ken Frieden, “Freud, Women, and Jews,” *The Solomon Goldman Lectures, Volume VIII*, ed. Dean Phillip Bell and Hal M. Lewis (Chicago: The Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, 2003), 71.

<sup>25</sup> Though “The Jokes” or “Wits” might be a better translation, the edition I primarily used translates it as “Jokes” so I have followed suit.

<sup>26</sup> Elliott Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 94.

<sup>27</sup> “So far-reaching an agreement between the methods of the joke-work and those of the dream-work can scarcely be a matter of chance” (Freud, *Jokes*, 105).

<sup>28</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 5.

is, something comic ‘which *we* produce’.”<sup>29</sup> Freud, on the other hand, does not entirely agree that the comic is an umbrella that covers jokes. For Freud, the comic is always “found” while jokes are always “made.”<sup>30</sup> There are sub-sets of the comic which may be similar to jokes; Freud uses the example of “the naïve” because it, like a joke, requires a second person to be present to recognize the humor, but the naïve is still found, not made, and is not, therefore, quite the same animal as a joke.<sup>31</sup>

Jokes, then, may be an expression of the unconscious but they must still be intentional; accidental *bon mots*, while they may be comic, cannot properly be called jokes. For Freud it is usually an “underlying (sexual or aggressive) impulse that motivates a joke.”<sup>32</sup> And if all jokes must be made on purpose, then they must also be made *with* purpose. Intentionality plays an important role in the teleologies of many thinkers. Kant, for example, wrote that in order for an action, such as a satiric statement in this case, to be inherently moral the action must “be done *from duty* not from inclination” in which case the “action has its genuine moral worth.”<sup>33</sup> This would make satire with the intent of social critique a moral action and give to the satirist a higher standing than that allotted to the basic jokester.

Freud lays out the simpler motivations of most humorists. The most elementary, “innocent” motivation is just the joke itself made for no reason other than the art of it.<sup>34</sup> This, however, is rare. More often than not a joke has a secondary motivation, in which

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Frieden, “Freud, Women, and Jews,” 73.

<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott and Lara Denis (Calgary: Broadview Press, 2006), 59-60.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 115.

case “there are only two purposes that it may serve... it is either a *hostile* joke...or an *obscene* joke.”<sup>35</sup> Though Freud’s treatment of obscene jokes is fascinating in the classically “Freudian” way, the “hostile” jokes are of primary concern for the purposes of this dissertation because it is into this category that Freud places satire. This notion of hostility must be treated carefully, however. Elliott Oring has pointed out that “the presumption of aggression [in satire] has become something of an interpretive axiom.”<sup>36</sup> Simple reliance on what Oring terms “Aggression theory” loses many of the subtleties being reclaimed here; there is a lack of acceptance of the unique properties of humor as a form, a lack of distinction between hate speech and when “socially aggressive [jokes]...are told by various groups about themselves,” and an absence of investigation into why one would choose to express aggression through humor as opposed to, say, a letter to the editor.<sup>37</sup>

Intent is often an issue in literary criticism, but it seems even more pressing when dealing with a genre like satire. Freud (and most theorists of humor) would strongly disagree with the stance that meaning is solely in the hands of the reader, because from a psychological standpoint it is the intent of the satirist that determines the intent of the joke. If, then, we follow Freud and consider a joke an intentional act, and satire to be a “hostile” joke, we must assume that satire is intentional. This will help ameliorate confusion which could arise in the analysis of some satiric material when there is a question as to whether something is satiric simply because the author intended it to be so,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

or whether something that was not intended as a satire from the outset should be considered as one despite the author's intentions.

Though any conversation about the psychological meaning of humor must engage Freud, an analysis of the role of Judaism in satire is doubly enmeshed with Freud's theories of humor. It has been pointed out that the majority of the jokes actually included in the book were "favorites from [Freud's] own repertoire,"<sup>38</sup> and that the entire book was simply an excuse for Freud to share his Jewish joke collection with the world as even "his private correspondence is peppered with jokes, sarcastic allusions, and comic metaphors."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as viewed through his choice of jokes, "Freud's relationship... to Jews may be described as 'ambivalent'."<sup>40</sup> Freud's fascination with the motivations behind Western European (i.e. "cultured") Jews telling jokes about Eastern European Jews (i.e. "rubes") is evident in his treatment of specific jokes. He believes that these jokes illustrate the "manifold and hopeless miseries of the Jews," many of which must, for Freud, be related to dynamics of rich and poor, cultured and rural, and Jewish and non-Jewish.<sup>41</sup>

As Elliott Oring recounted, "A Gentile would have said that Freud had very few overtly Jewish characteristics, a fondness for relating Jewish jokes and anecdotes being perhaps the most prominent one." Thus the telling of jokes was a prominent element of Freud's presentation-of-self; particularly the telling of Jewish jokes.<sup>42</sup> It seems clear to

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Joyce Crick's preface to Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (NY: Penguin, 2003), xxxvii; Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 96.

<sup>40</sup> Frieden, "Freud, Women, and Jews," 72.

<sup>41</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 97.

Freud that when a non-Jew tells a Jewish joke it is simply mean, so that is less interesting to him. But the ability of a Jew to tell a self-deprecatory, yet still “hostile” joke occupies much of the text. The issue of hostility and self-deprecation is a key one in Chapter 4, because while Freud saw Jews telling Jewish jokes to other Jews as a neutral act, those who want to label some satirists as “self-loathing Jews” feel that even though the jokester is Jewish, the joke can still be hostile or tendentious.

This relationship between self-debasement and the debasement of others is one that Freud held onto late into his career. In 1927 he wrote a short follow-up essay to *Jokes* called “Humor.”<sup>43</sup> In it he says that there are “two ways in which the humorous process can take place,” both of which require a minimum of two participants.<sup>44</sup> In the first, someone makes themselves humorous while a second spectator enjoys the performance. This would, of course, generally be seen as self-deprecation. In the second way one person “takes no part at all in the humorous process, but is made the object of humorous contemplations by the other [party].”<sup>45</sup> In this instance the deprecation is turned on the unsuspecting other. If Kant’s notion of duty is added, however, mocking an unsuspecting other could still be a moral act if the mockery stems from a sense of civic or cultural duty.

This is apparent in the first Jewish joke Freud analyzes. He tells a story he once heard in which one Jewish man hears a convert from Judaism make a “spiteful remark

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<sup>43</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Humour,” in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud 21 (New York: Norton and Co, 1976), 159-166.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



about the Jewish character.”<sup>46</sup> The listener responds “‘Herr Hofrat...your antesemitism was well-known to me, your antisemitism is new to me’” (emphasis Freud’s).<sup>47</sup> The joke is that in changing only one letter<sup>48</sup> the listener has made clear that he is surprised to hear someone born a Jew speak badly of other Jews. As this is not an obscene joke and does not seem to be an innocent joke, it must be a hostile joke. But it is likely that even Freud would agree that the joke made at the expense of the “self-loathing Jew” was less hostile (or perhaps only differently hostile) than the original “antisemitic” remark. It could further be argued that a biting remark the aim of which is to stem the growth of hatred and discrimination would very much arise from a sense of duty, and therefore be moral despite being hostile. That grey area will be probed extensively in the following pages, and questions of hostility and morality will frame much of this analysis.

Freud also lays out an important distinction between a Jewish joke, what we would more properly call simply a joke by a Jew, and a *Jewish* joke, meaning a joke with actual Jewish content (emphasis mine). He tells an old joke in which one Jew asks another “Have you taken a bath?” and the second responds “Why? Is one missing?”<sup>49</sup> It is an innocuous enough joke, based on the double meaning of the word “taken” that seems to be an innocent, and not hostile joke. Freud says of it “it is again a Jewish joke; but this time it is only the setting that is Jewish, the core belongs to humanity in general.”<sup>50</sup> This highlights the importance of *mise en scène*. Simply told, with no editorializing or context,

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<sup>46</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 35-36.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> In German the joke is: “Ihr Antesemitismus war mir bekannt, Ihr Antisemitismus ist mir neu.” This is an excellent example of a joke that simply would not work in any language that does not share “anti-” and “ante-” as prefixes.

<sup>49</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 55-56.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 56.

it is a universal and therefore innocent joke. But let us say it was rendered in cartoon form. If the second Jew were depicted in the classical anti-Semitic way: dark, stooped, shiftily-eyed and obsequious would his immediate assumption that he was being accused of theft (or of filthiness, for that matter) be so bereft of secondary meaning? What if another group around whom stereotypes of dishonesty or thievery were substituted? To Freud, it was a statement on humanity, but to one with less honorable intentions it could just as easily be a very hostile joke.

Compare this bath joke with two other jokes Freud includes. In one, a Jew boasts “I have a bath every year, whether I need it or not” and in the second one Jew notices some food caught in another Jew’s beard. A dialogue ensues: ““I can tell you what you had to eat yesterday’—‘Well, tell me’—‘Lentils, then’—‘Wrong: the day before yesterday.’”<sup>51</sup> Freud calls these examples of “overstatement” jokes, and the first in particular does illustrate that type of joke very clearly. The humor comes from the extremity of the situation. But both cases, amusing though they may be, revolve around an extreme lack of hygiene on the part of the Jewish subjects of the jokes.

Again, context is the key. Told innocently, the jokes are fairly innocuous; slightly hostile, but not overwhelmingly so. Told with malice, or shown with the trappings of prejudice, these become potentially insidious reminders of the supposed filthiness of the Jewish people. In all of the preceding jokes, however, the intentional object of the joke is an individual Jew, and by extension Jewish habits or characteristics. According to my analysis, this kind of satire could exist in Freud’s day but not in third generation satire because the Holocaust rendered Jewish satirists unable to make Jews themselves the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 84.

primary focus of their critique for a time. Freud predated the post-World War II need I will be identifying to protect the Jewish people from collective critique, so in that way he shares something with contemporary satirists, now living and writing a century later, than he does with those who followed him more closely but experienced the War. Follow the bouncing ball; it changes form every generation as different external pressures assert themselves on the ball's current owners.

Freud was also well aware of the insider/outsider dilemma, or the issue of how we behave around or treat “us” versus “them.” He tells a joke of a Galician Jew travelling on a train.<sup>52</sup> The Jew has made himself quite at home, unbuttoning his coat, putting his feet up on the seat, and generally lounging. A well-dressed man enters the train car and the Jew immediately pulls himself together and takes up “a proper pose.” The well-dressed man is doing some calculations in a notebook, and finally looks up and asks the Jew if he knows when Yom Kippur is. Hearing this, the Jew says “Oho!” and puts his feet back up again before responding. Freud tells the joke as an example of “displacement,” but other meanings are apparent. The Jew feels the need to be on good behavior for a stranger, but when the stranger turns out to be another Jew, the pretense of propriety is immediately dropped. There are different behaviors within a group and with outsiders, and this easily extrapolates to the idea that “no one insults my family but me.” A Jew (such as Freud) telling Jewish jokes is one thing; an outsider doing it is quite another story. The object of this joke is slightly different. It is still a Jew, but in this case there is a tacit acknowledgement that all Jews know or care when Yom Kippur falls. The Jews in this

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 95.

joke, unlike the Jews in the previous joke, actually prove themselves to be Jews as opposed to being just possessed of Jewish habits or behaviors.

Freud calls these jokes “self-criticism as a determinant” and says that it is the reason why so many of the best jokes “have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life.”<sup>53</sup> The act of self-criticism, Freud feels, is part of the over-determined identity marker “Jewish,” so it stands to reason that those who identify with that group would excel at self-deprecating humor. For Freud, the difference is all about perspective, “the jokes made about Jews by ‘foreigners’ are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners<sup>54</sup> as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too; but they know their real faults as well as their connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with creates the subjective determinant (usually so hard to arrive at) of the joke-work.”<sup>55</sup>

Freud uses as examples of this the above described joke of the Jews on the train, which had been previously used to show how a small detail can explain a joke, but is now an example of the difference between truly hostile jokes and only internally-hostile jokes. He also points to the entire category of jokes which deal with the rich Jew and the poor

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 133. The original reads, “Diese Bedingung der Selbstkritik mag uns erklären dass gerade auf dem Boden des jüdischen Volkslebens ein Anzahl der trefflichsten Witz erwachsen sind von denen wir ja hier reichliche Proben gegeben haben.” (*Der Witz*, 93)

<sup>54</sup> “Foreigners,” for Freud, are non-Jews. Though notions of the separateness of the Jews existing in the Germanic imagination make us uncomfortable today in hindsight, in 1905 this was an ideology employed by Jews just as readily as by those opposed to the Jews, despite the undeniable presence of anti-Semitism in Vienna in Freud’s day. Also, it should be noted that the translation of the German *Fremde* as “foreigner” is inexact. *Fremde* does not have exactly the same sense as the more direct *Ausländer*. *Fremde* is more “unfamiliar.”

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Jew, or the Baron and the *schnorrer* (beggar).<sup>56</sup> Here Freud begins to deal with Judaism, not just Jews. The moral of all the Rich Jew/Poor Jew jokes, according to Freud, is that ““there is really no advantage in being a rich man if one is a Jew. Other people’s misery makes it impossible to enjoy one’s own happiness.””<sup>57</sup> Judaism as a religious system places great emphasis on justice and the requirement of charitable work and Freud is saying that this category satirizes this aspect of obligatory humanitarianism in Jewish law and custom.

Ruth Wisse also recounts this story, but says it “conveys the Jews’ democratic mode of thinking” so that instead of the joke being satire it “redeems the [stereotype of the uncouth traditional Jew] through the egalitarian spirit it uncovers among the Jews themselves”<sup>58</sup> She reads Freud’s opinion on “country Jews” and his relationship to Jewishness as a positive trait quite differently than I do. As I have said, I see this as internally-hostile satire and not a redeeming of Jewish egalitarianism. I believe Freud’s treatment of the famous “salmon mayonnaise” joke is a good indication that he is at least as often critiquing the *schnorrer* as he is celebrating Jewish unity.

These jokes would be close to those which Freud claims “attack religious dogmas and even the belief in God.”<sup>59</sup> For Freud, healthy skepticism was an important part of the way an intelligent person viewed the world; without the ability to doubt the reality of even accepted phenomena such as miracles or acts of God, one would forever fall prey to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Wisse, Ruth R. *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 136.

the temptation to live in a world in which “reality is disregarded in favor of possibility.”<sup>60</sup> He uses as an example of this category a joke about a fictional Hasidic rabbi in Cracow who claimed to be able to perform miracles.<sup>61</sup> The rabbi in question has a vision that a rabbi in the distant town of Lemberg has died, and his disciples, never doubting his psychic ability, immediately go into mourning for the deceased rabbi. As visitors arrive from Lemberg, it soon becomes apparent that their rabbi is most assuredly not dead. A skeptic takes that opportunity to mock a disciple of the Rabbi of Cracow, pointing out the rabbi’s failure. The disciple, however, chooses to focus on what he sees as the success in the episode by saying “whatever you may say, the *Kuck*<sup>62</sup> from Cracow to Lemberg was a magnificent one.” The whole business of miracle-working is thus being mocked, as are those who follow blindly the miracle workers themselves. The satirizing of Hasidic Jews and their enigmatic leaders has been a common theme in Jewish literature, so it is not surprising that Freud should focus on them.<sup>63</sup>

Freud writes all around but not directly about one of the central issues at work here: that of the self-deprecating aspect of these jokes. For Freud and others, the differences between rural, superstitious *Ostjuden* and the more cultured and civilized Western European Jews such as himself were sufficiently extreme to make joking about them not really self-deprecating at all. And yet there is still a degree of self-critique in these jokes by Jews about Jews, particularly in the way an outside observer perceives such a joke. Oring points out that “Jewish jokes were often characterized as ‘turned by

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 73; cf. *ibid.*, 136.

<sup>62</sup> Freud identifies this as a Yiddish word meaning “look” or “distant look.”

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, stories by Polish author I.L. Peretz such as “If Not Higher” and “Kabbalists.” They are often discussed in that context as a good example of the fairly secular Peretz both satirizing blind faith, and also leaving space for the purpose of such faith in the lives of the faithful.

the speaker against himself' or marked by a distinctive tendency towards 'self-criticism.'"<sup>64</sup> Oring argues further, as have many before him, that self-criticism need not necessarily be seen as "self-negation" or self-loathing. In fact, he says, "the self-denying motifs of humorous fictions may prove benign or insignificant."<sup>65</sup> This argument is, however, just as short-sighted and ultimately unhelpful as the older idea that Jewish satirists hated themselves and expressed that hatred through humor. One of the ideas the forthcoming chapters will show is that while self-satire should not be written off as "simply" self-hatred, neither is it "insignificant." There is a great deal of significance to both the satire itself and the reception to it, as we will see.

Freud acknowledged several previous writers who had delved into the comic, but he only once mentions Henri Bergson's publication from 1900 called "Laughter: An Essay on the Comic."<sup>66</sup> Like Freud, Bergson was an assimilated Jew, but unlike Freud he did not discuss Jewish jokes or any specific category of jokes in his essay. He was, instead, concerned with the act of laughter itself. He wanted to analyze not the specific content and formation of the joke, but why jokes happen in the first place, and why we as a species developed the ability to laugh. "What does laughter mean?" Bergson asks, "What is the [base] element in the laughable?"<sup>67</sup>

Bergson speculates several points about laughter. First, he says that "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*."<sup>68</sup> By this he means that nature

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<sup>64</sup> Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 122.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>66</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 259.

<sup>67</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Comic*, trans. Cloudsey Brerton (Digireads.com, 2010), 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

and animals may be many things, “beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly” but they will never be laughable because they are essentially non-human. When we do laugh at something non-human it is because we recognize in it human elements.<sup>69</sup> To use a very contemporary example, we laugh at cat videos on the internet not because the cats are inherently funny, but because we have captioned them as though the cats were speaking (pidgin) English or see the cats adopting what we believe to be “human” postures. In more general terms, we must recognize something of ourselves in order to laugh.

Bergson’s second main point is that there is an “*absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter.”<sup>70</sup> By this Bergson means that true, strong emotion is anathema to the kind of laughter he describes. He is not discussing involuntary or reflexive laughter like in cases of extreme shock or hysteria, but (as Freud would echo) laughter at something funny. He explains further that he does “not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity.”<sup>71</sup> This is a vital point, which needs to be considered along with Freud’s assertion that satire is hostile. In satire, particularly self-satire, reception usually involves an assumption of a “loving” critique or a “loathing” critique. Bergson is saying that to laugh at someone or something, even something to which you are closely related, there must be a certain level of emotional detachment which would render the satire “hostile” in an academic sense only, not in an emotional sense.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



Bergson goes a step further in describing this relationship when he links irony and humor. Irony, Bergson says, is to “state what ought to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is actually being done.”<sup>72</sup> Humor, on the other hand, is to pretend to “describe with scrupulous minuteness what is being done, and pretend to believe that this is just what ought to be done.”<sup>73</sup> The key here is that Bergson says “both are forms of satire, but irony is oratorical in its nature, whilst humor partakes of the scientific... humor is the more emphasized the deeper we go down into an evil that actually is, in order to set down its details in the most cold-blooded indifference... A humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist.”<sup>74</sup> For Bergson humor is a subset of satire that is both moralistic and (because all laughter is) emotionally distanced.

Bergson’s final main point is that laughter is “a sort of *social gesture*.”<sup>75</sup> This has been noted by scientific researchers, who have observed that people laughed thirty times more frequently in a group than they did alone when shown humorous stimuli.<sup>76</sup> For Bergson, however, society’s role is more qualitative. “The comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence.”<sup>77</sup> Both the reaction to comedic material (laughter) and the creation of the comedic material require a group or society, and furthermore in Bergson’s description “a group of men concentrate their attention *on one of their number*,” meaning that there is, like with the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 45.

<sup>77</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, 8.

example of humor in nature, a requirement of internality or commonality, shared stakes and similar values, in order for true humor (or therefore satire) to exist.

This is similar to the “superiority” theory, which many theorists of humor have put forth; the idea that these hostile jokes “function, in part, by making the hearer feel better than the people who are the butt of such jokes.”<sup>78</sup> D. H. Monro attempted in 1951 what he claimed would be the first “general survey of all the theories” of humor.<sup>79</sup> He explained his theory of why we laugh, broke down some sixteen other theories of humor, and then synthesized them all at the end. Monro’s basic method is that he establishes six types of laughter-producing situations and holds each theorist’s ideas up to them to see if he can account for any or all of them. The six categories are: Any Breach of the Usual Order of Events, Any Forbidden Breach of the Usual Order of Events, Importing into One Situation What Belongs in Another, Wordplay, Nonsense, and Small Misfortunes; Want of Knowledge or Skill.<sup>80</sup> Though in several cases (such as with Freud and Bergson) a first-hand analysis of a text can yield more fruitful results than Monro’s analysis alone, his categories are nonetheless helpful.

When discussing the superiority motivation for humor, he relies largely on English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain. Hobbes’ bleak view of humanity predisposed him towards viewing humor in a way that divides rather than unites people. Monro says that superiority is the “Forbidden Breach” that best supports Hobbes’ stance on human interactions, because it is here we find “comic villains,” and when we laugh *at* comic villains we are doing it out of a feeling of

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<sup>78</sup> Frieden, “Freud, Women, and Jews,” 75.

<sup>79</sup> D. H. Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 7.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-89.

superiority (although Monro acknowledges that villains we laugh *with* are harder to reconcile).<sup>81</sup> From this we can extrapolate that any time we are laughing at a miscreant or one who in some ways breaks the rules we are doing it because on some level it makes us feel better about ourselves, or provides what Monro calls “self glory.” Hobbes’ idea that we “exalt the self through contrast with the infirmities of others” gives satire a place among basic human instincts for self-preservation and power.<sup>82</sup> Satire is clearly quite a different creature for different people; Freud tells us satire is hostile, Bergson tells us it requires commonality, and Monro now tells us it is performed in the service of self-esteem. The coming chapters will show that it is at times all of these, and yet none if they must be asked to exist independently of each other.

Of satire Monro says that it is based in comparison, “because part of our enjoyment is the criticism which is nearly always complicit in the comparison.”<sup>83</sup> He then divides satire into two subcategories: conservative satire and radical satire. Conservative satire links two things in unexpected ways, but through the linking it highlights disparities. Monro says “all humor which depends on foreign or lower-class accents, on the inadequacy of the new-rich...or on the vice which is laughed at and not with, is of this type.”<sup>84</sup> Recall Freud’s category of joke which revolved around the Baron and the *schnorrer*. This is precisely the type of satire Monro is describing as “conservative,” satire which depends on the validity of previously acknowledged categories.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>82</sup> Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, 122.

<sup>83</sup> Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, 249.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

“Radical” satire, on the other hand “casts doubt on the validity of the compartmentalization upon which it depends.”<sup>85</sup> The example Monroe gives is of a willful child who refuses to get off a toy rocking horse in a store, despite the best efforts of his parents and all the store staff. Finally a young man comes forward and asks to try, saying that he has studied child psychology extensively. He whispers in the child’s ear, and the child immediately hops down and says he is ready to go home. When the stunned onlookers ask for this amazing secret of the juvenile mind, the young man responds: “I just said: ‘Get off that horse you little ---- or I’ll knock your block off!’”<sup>86</sup> The humor in this case comes not only from the incongruity of the gentle description of the man’s “whisper” juxtaposed against the vulgarity of what was being said, but also from breaking down the mystique of things we held dear, such as the notion that someone who has studied psychology holds the secret to child rearing. This is perhaps what Freud was getting at in his anti-dogma jokes, such as the story of the prognosticating rabbi, but undoubtedly this is what satire of religion is attempting to inculcate.

Monro’s concluding point on the subject of superiority theory is that it found its fullest expression when philosopher Alexander Bain took Thomas Hobbes’ ideas about the way humans exist with one another and attempted to expand them and make them more universally applicable. Bain was an empiricist and moral philosopher who was heavily involved in education reform and was therefore more concerned with broad populations than was Hobbes, who was more narrowly focused on governments and social contracts amongst certain privileged portions of society. First, Bain “does not

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

demand direct consciousness of our own superiority.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, we may not *feel* superior when we, say, watch the Road Runner outwit Wile E. Coyote for the thousandth time, but we are nonetheless identifying with the victor. Bain’s second point is to take Hobbes into a whole new arena. Bain “does not demand a person as the object of derision: it may be an idea, a political institution, or even ‘inanimate things that by personification have contracted associations of dignity.’”<sup>88</sup> This would clearly allow for satire aimed at religious traditions, or even specific rituals or objects like, for example, circumcision or a crucifix.

Freud, Bergson, and Monro present differing, but nonetheless overlapping theories of why we joke and laugh. Freud was more concerned with the act of purposely creating humor, and why we craft jokes the way we do, including those which are about religion. Bergson was more concerned with the motivations behind the response to the joke, namely laughter. He maintains that all humor is satire, although not all satire is humor (some being irony), and also that laughter is at its core a social gesture, which has been borne out by contemporary quantitative studies. Monro took all the theories of previous decades and put them in conversation with each other and synthesized them. He established two categories of satire, as well as clarifying the superiority aspect of laughter, wherein we laugh because we feel superior to the subject of the joke, either consciously *or subconsciously*. Freud’s “hostile” joke and Monro’s explanation of the way jokes are frequently built around superiority both give a framework for the very aggressive way third generation satirists make Judaism the object of their satire. They are

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

attacking a Thing they view as dead, and deriding those people who continue to cling to its corpse.

### **Thing Theory**

The other theoretical model that informs much of this dissertation is Bill Brown's Thing Theory. What Freud lacked was a way to describe the intentional object of the jokes he was retelling. Thing Theory would have given Freud that vocabulary because it is focused on intent, use, and the relationship between the user and the item used. I see Brown's Thing status as being very similar to Marx's reification, but I am leaning more heavily on Brown's theory than Marx's because Brown's is *meant* to apply to culture and cultural artifacts, whereas Marx's, of course, was conceived of as a way to explain the commodification of objects. In a sense, when you reify an object you turn a blind eye to or forget the human or environmental cost behind it and consider it a single object, not the sum of a process. In Brown's theory, the status of a Thing requires not forgetting, but a change in the way you see or treat an object. Brown's Thing and Marx's object are also not the same because at its core a thing is useless. An object, for Brown, becomes a Thing when it no longer has a use or is broken. Marx's objects may be quite functional and useful, but they are alienated from their production. A Thing like Judaism, would be treated in different ways by different people; it is possible under Brown's rubric for an item to be simultaneously a "Thing" to one person and an "object" to another, because while to one person it may be useless, to another it may be an heirloom, or a piece of art,

or even still perform its original function. Because I am applying this theory to Judaism, which is an abstract in many ways, I find Brown's ideas easier to apply.<sup>89</sup>

First of all, it is important to note that by labeling Judaism as a "Thing" I am not implying that it is without value or importance. Things can be very important. Brown describes, "the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut."<sup>90</sup> Things can and do have major impact on your life, but what Brown means is that until they exert their power on you they are not of major concern. You may see the paper or the nut (ostensibly you did not see the toy, which is why you tripped), but they are not *important* until they assert themselves, at which time they remind you that the "body is a thing among things."<sup>91</sup>

"Thing" is an amorphous term. On the one hand, it is a catchall. Brown says it "designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the every day."<sup>92</sup> "Hand me that blue thing" will suffice as a description in most non-professional settings. So it can be a catchall; anything, really, can be a Thing. On the other hand, however, a Thing is "not quite apprehended."<sup>93</sup> Here Brown gets to the crux of the matter: "Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible

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<sup>89</sup> For clarity and ease of reading I am capitalizing "Thing" when I am using it in this Brownian way. Brown himself does not, although other contributors to *Things* do, and I am choosing the latter method. I am also capitalizing "Objectify" when I mean to say making the opposite of a Thing, to make it clearer and separate the term from the more common usage.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

to objects). But this temporality obscures the all-at-oneness, the simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object, just as it is, even as it names something else.*”<sup>94</sup>

This “object/thing dialectic” is one of the key components for my thesis. An object has a purpose or a use, a Thing simply exists. The same item can be at times an object, and at other times a Thing. When you give your child a much-desired toy for her birthday, it is an object. When you trip over the same toy in a dark living room, it is a Thing. Almost anything can move back and forth between object and Thing depending on the situation. Sometimes, however, thingness has more of an ontological status. Objects can become things when they cease to perform the function for which they were designed; “when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, then the windows get filthy,” then an object has become a thing.<sup>95</sup> Some of those cases are still potentially temporary—you can easily enough wash a filthy window—but some may be permanent. The car or the drill may never again be able to perform their designed function, so that object is forevermore a thing, at least to you. Someone else may consider it a useful object as scrap metal or parts, but not you.

This is precisely how I am applying Thing Theory to Judaism in the third generation satires. Judaism has long been an object, and may certainly still be an object for many people. Satirists may be able to tap into the zeitgeist, but they do not represent all people, and there are many American Jews for whom Judaism never lost its social or

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 4.



religious function.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, for these satirists it has become a thing; it no longer performs the function for which it was designed, and therefore it has no purpose and is no longer an object. The Jewish People still very much have a purpose; survival. But Judaism is, apparently, not the object that is going to help them accomplish that goal, and it is thus reduced to thingness. Again, this does not mean it is entirely without power or presence; a Thing can and will assert itself. But in day to day life it is unimportant; in a more general sense it is considered broken or worn-out, so it sits on a shelf, mostly ignored.

The interesting process that takes place in my analysis is that, in a sense, by virtue of being a Thing Judaism does become an object once again, though in a very different sense. Think, for example, of an old, Civil War-era gun. As a gun it is quite likely that it no longer functions, so it has become a Thing. But if that gun had belonged to your great, great, great grandfather it has gained a new function as a family heirloom. This is what I see happening with Judaism through satire, the introduction of affect into the equation changes the outcome. The value added through affect means that the item does not get thrown away like a broken item with no extrinsic value because it has some intrinsic value through tradition or family heritage. But it is nevertheless no longer a functional object; it is a decorative or sentimental object. So Judaism as is presented is both Thing and object simultaneously; as a religion it is a Thing, but as an heirloom it is an object. It still looks pretty, or works as a conversation piece, or *unites the family through memory* even if it does not perform its original function any longer.

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<sup>96</sup> I am not here trying to argue that there *is* an essentialist function to religion. My argument stems from what the satirists seem to believe about religion and Judaism based on the way they use it.

What *is* the original function of religion? To some extent the lack of an answer to this question is why the thingification of Judaism can happen. Again and again that need to define religion, or at least know how *other* people define religion, stands in the way of understanding how critiques of religion function. The older satirists, in the 1960s and 1970s, were fully immersed in the counterculture and speak about the problems of “organized religion” and the corruption of religious institutions. And liberal, rational, enlightened people are loath to admit any sort of supernatural purpose to religion such as maintaining a right relationship with God. No matter how far we travel, Durkheim and Eliade still seem to be present in our conversations about what religion means and how it works. In particular in the case of the satiric critique of Judaism it seems as though some imagined or presumed function for religion has been lost, as there is very little clarity on what this alleged function once was. Whatever it was though, “they” found it useful in previous generations while “we” no longer need it.<sup>97</sup> But as this dissertation deals largely with works of fiction and imagination, the perception of Judaism matters as much if not more than the reality. If people *think* Judaism has lost its function that satisfies the requirements Brown lays out.

In a subsequent essay in the volume, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” Peter Schwenger talks about the problem with “the notion of a perfect correspondence between words and the physical things they denominate.”<sup>98</sup> Words have always been imperfect representations of the objects, or concepts, they represent. “Judaism” does not actually

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<sup>97</sup> Communally then we seem to have sided with the functional reductionists, as both Freud and Durkheim saw religion as A) having a place in society but more importantly B) losing that place to secularism, rationalism, and empiricism.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 135.

*describe* Judaism, it simply stands in for it in a semiotic way. This is part of why this theory works; if the word “Judaism” actually contained the meaning of Judaism then it would be difficult if not impossible for it to become a Thing. It would be perceived as an ever-changing and evolving nexus of feelings, ideas, beliefs, and meanings and would never be stable enough to shift from object to Thing. Only because the word is an imperfect stand-in can the concept become calcified enough to cease functioning.

Naming is an act of great power. Schwenger mentions the example of Adam being given the power to name the objects of creation in Genesis, but also the ability to change the function of an object simply through naming. He mentions as well that in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Jacques Lacan misreads (perhaps intentionally, according to Schwenger) Heidegger’s use of a “jug” in his essay “The Thing” and instead calls it a “vase.” To Schwenger this matters because a jug and a vase may have an identical form, but they have nearly an opposite function. A jug is something from which you decant, whereas a vase is something designed to be filled. The jug has performed its function only when it goes from full to empty, which a vase must go from empty to full to have been used properly. Naming something can change the very essence of the object, if an object’s essence is, in fact, contained in its function. So when satirists name Judaism as “religion,” “organized religion,” “institutionalized religion,” or (in one case we will see in chapter 3) “barbaric religion” they fundamentally change the function and understanding of the object, leaving it vulnerable to thingification. According to Schwenger, “the word that replaces the thing is absence as much as presence, a lack that draws Adam into the desire to fill it, a desire that can only move endlessly along the signifying chain, never fulfilling itself, never fulfilling a fundamental emptiness,” and

this is precisely what I see happening.<sup>99</sup> Judaism becomes a Thing because of the need to label or define it, and because of the need to set it in opposition to The Jews in the immediate post-War period.

The final essay from *Thing Theory* that has direct bearing on my proposed analysis is “Object, Relic, Fetish, Things: Joesph Beyus and the Museum” by Charity Scribner. Her essay is mainly about the life of objects/Things from the former German Democratic Republic in a unified Germany. But in discussing that she brings up the role of relics and mourning, and I think that is an important aspect of, in particular, the way Judaism is re-Objectified in the twenty-first century. A relic, Scribner argues, is never a Thing in the same way I argued above that an heirloom is never a Thing. They both have an emotional function that supersedes whatever practical function the object-Thing may have had previously. “Beheld by a mourner,” Scribner explains, “a proper relic takes on a specific meaning. It is instilled with the power to signify the death of the loved one and, moreover, to ward off his return. An authentic relic...cannot be thrown away.”<sup>100</sup> In this way Things can become objects, even over and above the wishes of the previous owner or creator. Once you are gone (dead in Scribner’s examples, but simply gone is good enough) you lose control over the way your relics are used. Something you discarded, something you intended to never again see the light of day, can and will be taken by those who loved or revered you and become useful once again through their appropriation as a relic.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>100</sup> Charity Scribner, “Object, Relic, Fetish, Things: Joesph Beyus and the Museum,” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 341.

In this way, despite contemporary satirists being handed a rubber ball-Judaism-Thing and told, in effect, “this is not what matters; the Jewish *people* matter,” they are well within their rights to treat that Thing as a relic of the generation that came before them, and that laid the groundwork for everything they are. If, as I am proposing, the luminaries of the third generation (Roth, Malamud, Allen, Heller) defined what it was to be an American Jew to a whole generation, it should come as no surprise that their discarded Things, especially their discarded Judaism-Thing, was turned into an heirloom, a relic, an object of reverence, and therefore gained new purpose and new functionality. Furthermore, “depleted of use-value, the relic reminds the mourner of his power over the dead.”<sup>101</sup> If that is true then it is more than just a simple case of hero-worship or imitation that gives new life to the Judaism-Thing, it is the contemporary generation asserting their power and their dominance. It is their way of consciously seizing control of the narrative of American Judaism and proving that they are now the ones determining what is an object and what is a Thing.

What is now to follow will be three chapters in which I will demonstrate the ways that the older generation made Judaism a Thing, and the way the contemporary generation is now re-Objectifying, or revivifying it. The chapters themselves will, in a not entirely tongue-in-cheek fashion, mirror the aforementioned, classic, three-legged support of Jewish life: Torah, God, and Israel. Chapter 2—Torah—will look at satire done through parodies of sacred texts. In this chapter I will introduce Linda Hutcheon’s theory of parody as a way to think about the relationship between satire and parody, and to help frame the way I understand the function of parodic texts as vehicles of satire. It will look

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

at literary works by Woody Allen and Joseph Heller as representatives of the third generation and then contrast them to a recent short story by Nathan Englander, a fine spokesperson for the contemporary generation.

Chapter 3—God—will focus on Jewish rituals and life cycle events. This chapter contains the most complicated and liminal material because the third generation did not seriously engage with rituals much in their satires, so this chapter introduces the way the difficult-to-pin-down Baby Boom generation uses Judaism in satire. Two of the primary examples are from an early *Saturday Night Live* faux-merical and an episode of *Seinfeld*, both of which were written by people born right after the war, and who therefore exhibit aspects of both generations. They will be contrasted with Jonathan Tropper's 2009 novel *This is Where I Leave You*. This chapter will rely heavily on Ritual Theory, particularly Ronald Grimes' *The Craft of Ritual Studies* and will also introduce certain aspects of Cultural Studies.

Finally chapter 4—Israel—will deal with the way that the representations of Jewish peoplehood and Jewish identity differ from the representations of more traditional “religious” forms. This chapter uses short stories by Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud, as well as a very short segment of a Woody Allen film to show the heavy emphasis on the protection of the Jewish people exhibited by the third generation and the way that “religion” is, in some ways, seen as the enemy of an authentic identity. The contemporary contrast to this will be Jennifer Westfeldt's film *Kissing Jessica Stein* which, perhaps more clearly than any other example, shows the way Judaism has been reclaimed and re-Objectified by contemporary satirists. It has a purpose and a function once again, and therefore has new life and new status as a Judaism-object and not Judaism-Thing.

I will conclude by reassessing how the treatment of Judaism in American satire has changed over generations, in part due to increasing distance from the Holocaust and a reattachment to Jewish religious traditions, and synthesize the analyses of different forms of satire. I will also propose an argument for seeing the consumption of satire itself as a ritual for contemporary American Jews in the way that it sets certain times and spaces apart as special, but differs from orthopraxy because it is creating a new sense of what is sacred. What I believe I will have demonstrated is that the handing-down of the Judaism-Thing, instead of encouraging later generations to stick the Thing on the shelf and forget about it, actually inspired subsequent satirists to invest it with new life and new purpose. As an heirloom, relic, and ultimately newly-restored aspect of what it means to be an American Jew the texts and ritual forms of Judaism are being passed on to a new generation—one that is only now becoming aware of the myriad expressions of Judaism all around them—in a way that shows it to be alive and meaningful. What they do with their reinvigorated Judaism-object is anyone's guess.

## CHAPTER 2: TORAH (TORAH! TORAH!)

Buber reports that no successor was found in Berdichev after the death of Levi Yitzchak; there was no one who could take his place. Remarkably, after the death of Rabbi Swift in Sitka, Alaska, a similar situation prevailed.

—Gary Epstein<sup>1</sup>

Few appellations have been more overused and misunderstood than the designation of Jews as “People of the Book.” Over the centuries that has created a false impression that the “Book,” be it Torah, Mishna, Talmud, or a combination of all three is the essential core of Judaism and anything else, i.e. ritual, practice, belief, or liturgy are all secondary or extraneous. Although sources as far back as the Zohar have used the “Torah/God/Israel” triad, the Torah has long enjoyed a slightly higher profile than the other two aspects. And yet, while the written word does play an important part in the practice of the Jewish religion for many adherents, scripture occupies a liminal space for many contemporary Jews as is demonstrated by the satirists in this chapter. It is not, in most cases, treated as transcendently delivered or divinely written. It is sometimes treated as though one should strive to do the opposite of whatever is written in the text. But nevertheless, even those authors who treat it with extreme irreverence still treat it. It cannot be ignored, it can only be turned into a negative foil.

In this chapter I will focus on the written word—specifically on written words that satirize, or even parody, other written words. As representatives of the third

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Epstein, “Tales of the American Masters,” in *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, ed. William Novak and Moshe Waldoks (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 130.



generation, Woody Allen and Joseph Heller are two men on opposite ends of the Jewish cultural spectrum. They are also two people who are not most commonly associated with the work under discussion here. That is both an advantage, as there is a great deal that can still be said about them, and a disadvantage because the copious volume of secondary literature on these two cultural giants is largely silent on these works. Heller, of course, is usually identified with his debut novel *Catch-22*, while Allen is primarily known for his film work. The contemporary contribution to this chapter comes from Nathan Englander, who is equally well known for his short stories and novels, which sets him apart from his predecessors.

Specifically, in this chapter, I will be arguing that the way writers use, abuse, and relate to scriptural (or scripture-like) texts demonstrates the larger argument I am making about changing relationships to both religious Judaism and the “The Jewish People.” The use of Judaism in these satires is more than superficial; it is what gives the satire teeth. Satire, as we will see, must have an agenda or a point. It can make it gently or aggressively, but there has to be a target. In these cases (and, indeed, in all the cases in this dissertation) I am arguing in part that it is only because of the way that the satirists are able to use and manipulate Judaism that their works become true satires. In Allen and Heller’s work we will see a desire to show Jewish texts as ridiculous, overrated, or false. Though they are telling very different stories, the way they approach scripture is nevertheless similar. Englander, on the other hand, treads very lightly in his use of scripture. So lightly, in fact, that many of the reviewers of his story either did not notice the biblical homage at all, or sensed it, but chalked it up to some text other than the Bible. He is using and perhaps parodying a particular tale from the Bible, but not at all in the

interest of mocking the Bible itself; he is interested in asking very hard questions about the limits and ethics of Jewish nationhood.

Because this chapter is entirely about texts, and specifically about parodies, I will take this opportunity to present some aspects of literary criticism that relate to the analysis of parodic texts. Linda Hutcheon and Dustin Griffin present two different ways of relating parody and satire, which is an important aspect of this chapter. In the same way that not all humor is satire, not all parody is necessarily satire. Also, neither parody nor satire is by definition humorous. They draw on three primary families of humor: superiority humor, inversion humor, and incongruity humor. Hutcheon talks about parody requiring a “combination of respectful homage and [an] ironically thumbed nose,” which separates it from other forms such as pastiche.<sup>2</sup> Pastiche is a very intentional and unironic formal repetition, which would include works that either copy identically someone else’s style or that are made up of actual pieces of other people’s work. Though some parodies are obvious, it is not always clear whether something is, indeed, a parody. Parody is a “bitextual synthesis” usually requiring some sort of formal repetition.<sup>3</sup> Both of the Allen stories we will examine are properly considered parodies because they mimic the form of the genre they are satirizing, but do it with an ironic edge. Heller’s *God Knows*, on the other hand, is not technically a parody because although it is shot-through with biblical references and quotations, it does not bear any resemblance to biblical form or structure and is therefore intertextual without being strictly parodic. Heller’s work would be more of a pastiche.

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, First Illinois Paperback Edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

In addition to detailing the ways Hutcheon and Griffin relate parody and satire I will briefly mention the work of Israel Davidson, who wrote about parody in Jewish literature, albeit in an earlier period than the ones I am discussing. As recently as 2004 Davidson's book, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, was called, "the only monograph on the subject [of Jewish parody]," a field that David Stern said, "may be the last virgin territory in the study of classical literature, one of the few realms in Jewish literary tradition as yet unsullied by scholarly hands."<sup>4</sup> Whether it is because parody is such a specific art form, or whether it has simply been overlooked in favor of flashier forms of satire, there has been little to nothing published on Jewish parodies, so Davidson's book remains a go-to text despite being more than a century old. After introducing the theoretical models at use in this chapter I will give background on Allen and Heller that helps contextualize why each of them was in a position to make Judaism a Thing in Brownian terms. I will give a close reading of two of Allen's stories from *Getting Even* (1971) and *Without Feathers* (1975) and *God Knows* (1984), a novel of Heller's, both of which show the ways in which the authors turn the text against itself and against a reverent reading of scripture. Finally, I will offer a reading of "Sister Hills" (2012), a short story of Englander's to show the ways in which he is making Judaism not a Thing, or re-Objectifying Jewish texts through his gentle parody and harsh satire.

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<sup>4</sup> David Stern, "The Alphabet of Ben Sira and the Early History of Parody in Jewish Literature," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 423.

## Theories of Parody and Satire

Although the previously discussed broad theories of humor and Thing Theory are undergirding this project, they cannot speak to some of the formal challenges of the way we analyze specific types of satire. In this chapter in particular it is important to understand a bit about the analysis of parody as a form of literature and a form of satire. I will begin with Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody*, which serves a role not unlike Monro's book for humor; she draws on myriad previous literary theories and synthesizes them into one comprehensive way of reading parody in art.

Hutcheon states at the outset that a part of her project is to "differentiate parody from other genres that are often confused with it: pastiche, burlesque, travesty, plagiarism, quotation, allusion, *and especially satire*."<sup>5</sup> She wants to draw a sharp distinction between parody and satire. This is not, however, as easy to do as Hutcheon implies at first. Hutcheon also says she is going to "study the special interaction of irony and parody, since irony is the major rhetorical strategy deployed by the genre."<sup>6</sup> Recall that Bergson called irony one of the two forms of satire (along with humor), so the two forms are linked through their mutual reliance on irony. Yet the relationship between parody and satire is deeper even than their shared use of irony. Hutcheon points out that "[t]he interaction of parody and satire in modern art is pervasive," additionally noting that Jane Austen, for example, "used parody as the disarming but effective literary vehicle for social satire."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 25. (emphasis added)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 44.

The reason Hutcheon wants to insist upon a separation between the forms, even while acknowledging their interdependence, seems to be one of subjective judgment. Hutcheon argues that, “both satire and parody imply critical distancing and therefore value judgments, but satire generally uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized—‘to distort, to belittle, to wound’. In modern parody, however, we have found that no such negative judgment is necessarily suggested in the ironic contrasting of texts.”<sup>8</sup> Using Monroe’s bifurcation of satire would throw doubt on Hutcheon’s assessment. His “conservative” satire does fit the “belittling” mold, but “radical” satire is more about overturning social norms and can be seen as empowering, which is the opposite of that which “wounds.”

Furthermore, parody and satire occupy different, though related, intellectual spaces. Parody is necessarily intertextual; it relies on the form, if not the subject matter, of a previous work in order to function. Elsewhere, Hutcheon wrote that parody “is *not* essentially depthless, trivial kitch...but rather that it can, and does, lead to a vision of interconnectedness.”<sup>9</sup> If you do not know the original you can appreciate the parody on its own merits, but you cannot fully understand the layers of meaning. Take, for example, the songs of well-known parodist Weird Al Yankovic. You can appreciate his lyrics and enjoy the stories being told by his songs, even if you have never heard the original song he is parodying, or even know that it is a parody at all. But you cannot truly appreciate his skill or the humor of his work unless you know both. Satire, on the other hand, must exist in the real world because it uses actual people, places, and events as its jumping off

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Hutcheon, “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History,” *Cultural Critique* 5 (1986-1987): 182.

point. You cannot become fully lost in a satire or it has lost its satiric edge. If the purpose of satire is to make a statement about some contemporary state of affairs, it cannot do its job unless the reader makes those connections. Take Jonathan Swift, for example.

*Gulliver's Travels* is considered both a satire and a parody, but it is neither if the reader cannot either make the connection to what Swift is satirizing about the foibles of human nature, or is familiar with other travelogue texts to recognize the parody. If the reader sees neither, it becomes simply a nice fantasy novel.

Parody can be satiric, satires can involve parody, but one begins from a fiction and one begins in reality. So while satires may reference other works, even in parodic form, they are not truly intertextual in the same way a parody is because they are still anchored in the real world. Even in a text like *Gulliver's Travels* the satiric and parodic elements of the story are, in some ways, separate. The formal parody of the travelogue does not especially deepen or sharpen the satire of human and national interactions. If this is the case, then Allen and Heller's works are very clearly parodies—the intertextuality of them is a necessary precondition for full appreciation of their work. Allen's stories, as we will see, come the closest to blending satire and parody in a related and interdependent way. It may actually be necessary that the reader recognize the intertextual parody in order to understand the satire which is just another aspect of the really well-honed writing of those seemingly slight stories. Englander's story, on the other hand, is much less clearly a parody as the parodic elements are so light that it is debatable whether familiarity with the source material impacts reader engagement. As if the relationship between satire and parody were not complicated enough, adding the element of humor into the mix only furthers the muddling of boundaries. Hutcheon holds

on to the issue of perceived negativity in satire when she says that “satire tends to defend norms; it ridicules in order to bring deviation into line... ‘black humor’, today’s most common form of satire, seems to many to be a defensive humor of shock, a humor of lost norms, of disorientation, of lost confidence.”<sup>10</sup> This very conflict shows the problem in trying to label satire as negative. Some satire is certainly normative, but a great deal of it (again, as asserted by Monro) is non-normative and is just as much about overcoming hegemony as it is about ridiculing deviants. As Bergson asserted, there is a necessary emotional distancing required for laughing, including satiric laughter, which would mean that satire cannot properly be called “mean.” Freud’s notion of the “hostility” of satire is not incommensurate with Bergson’s required emotional distance. The hostility can be formal, and not therefore personal or emotional, which keeps the two in harmony and also, I would argue, is more in line with what Freud himself meant when he termed it “hostile.” He did not call the satirist hostile, but the satire, which implies it is more a question of form than performer.

So black humor is satire and satire is not parody, but is parody humor? Hutcheon says that, for most people, the answer is yes. “The majority of theorists,” Hutcheon states, “want to include humor or derision in the very definition of parody.”<sup>11</sup> Hutcheon goes on to say that for a minority of theorists “parody is a form of serious art criticism, though its bite is still achieved through ridicule.”<sup>12</sup> She further points out that “in classical uses of the word parody, humor and ridicule were not considered part of its meaning” but nevertheless the implication is clear; in contemporary use parody is thought to be

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<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

humorous, and despite her protestations to the contrary there can be just as much ridicule in parody as in satire.<sup>13</sup> The room for ridicule in parody is a key element in seeing these parodies as part of the process of making a Thing, because the move to Thing requires a sense that the object no longer works. As regards religion, it is difficult to say that religion no longer works without that being a critique or even ridicule, so the ability to work satiric elements into parody is vital in seeing parodies as capable of making a Thing.

And despite Hutcheon's insistence on the negativity of satire, she does acknowledge a purpose to it. Though she says that although satire "possesses a marked ethos" which "can be called a scornful or disdainful ethos...[satire] should not be confused with simple invective... While satire can be destructive, there is also implied idealism."<sup>14</sup> Here she cites Freud by saying "there is, nevertheless, an aggressive side to satire's ethos," though as we have discussed Freud used the word *feindselig*, or "hostile."<sup>15</sup> Aggressive, however, is perhaps a better word than "hostile" because aggressive does not carry with it the same notion of personal investment. Viruses, for example, are described as "aggressive," as are weather systems. Neither can properly be called hostile.

Dustin Griffin, on the other hand, took quite a different approach in his book *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. He had, by his own admission, a more specific goal in mind than did Hutcheon and her broad theory. Griffin admits that he is focusing on "literary satire from 'high culture'," by which he means he is excluding novels, non-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



literary satire, and satire of popular culture.<sup>16</sup> He also seemed to be concerned with reclaiming satire from what scholars like Hutcheon had done to it. He felt that the theoretical conversation about satire was out of date, and while there were good contemporary books in individual examples of satire, as a unified theory something was missing.<sup>17</sup> According to Griffin satire is successful not through “the ardor or acuteness of its moral concern but for the brilliant wit and force of the satirist as rhetorician.”<sup>18</sup> So whereas Hutcheon focused much of her book on the strength of the cultural critique in satires that could be called both “high” and “low,” Griffin is concerned more with the art of the satire, not its target or message.

Also important in Griffin’s analysis is the idea that satire is not a singular term. Monroe began to move in this direction with his conservative and radical satire, but Griffin takes it even further. He says that “if we consider satire as a mode or a procedure rather than a literary kind, then it can appear at any place, at any time.”<sup>19</sup> Satire and parody have long been related because they have both been seen as types of rhetoric, but for Griffin satire becomes a mode of speech or even a frame of mind rather than one particular form of text. This frees satire from being exclusively literary, or even artistic. Satire could exist, under Griffin’s definition, outside of any identifiable, formal creation and could even be said to exist in the zeitgeist. It could take many forms and appear to critique anything, not just high culture. This, according to Griffin, allows greater space for Menippean satire, as opposed to satire with a singular or specific target.

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<sup>16</sup> Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Menippean satire is an ancient form of satire, drawing its name from the Greek satirist Menippus. Griffin brings it up as a way to broaden our definition of satire, and I bring it up because most (if not all) of the satire I am including in this dissertation would properly be called Menippean. Daniel Boyarin calls Menippean satire “a peculiar type of literature produced by and for intellectuals in which their own practices are both mocked and asserted at one and the same time.”<sup>20</sup> There can really be no better explanation of what the satires I have chosen for this dissertation, particularly the third generation satires, are. If you substitute “Jews” for “intellectuals,” (although in many satires those two groups are nearly identical) you see what is at stake in these satires. They are by and for Jews, and Jewish practice is simultaneously mocked and reinstantiated. Because while none of the works in this dissertation are actually parochial—they are all meant for a general, heterogeneous audience—the *satiric* message is really by, about, and for Jews. These are satires, critiques, of Jewish life, Jewish assimilation, Jewish materialism, Jewish identity, and Jewish practices. Anyone can recognize these messages, but it is Jews who are meant to take them to heart.

This is, I would argue, one of the things that saves especially the third generation’s material from being anti-Semitic or self-loathing. The majority of it (even perennial whipping boy Philip Roth) scrupulously avoids targeting specific Jews or particular, recognizable communities. In a way it props up Jewish traditions even as it mocks them. A Thing may have lost its original use, but it still exists. It does not cease to be, and the fact that Jewish traditions still exist to be torn down and mocked impacted the satire. The 1950s, *Leave It To Beaver* conformism caused certain aspects of Jewish life to

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 26.

become mainstreamed and Judaism became part of the American civil religion. Will Herberg wrote that in the 1950s, “religion is accepted as a normal part of the American Way of Life. Not to be—that is, not to identify oneself and be identified as—either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew is somehow not to be an American.”<sup>21</sup> So while the Menippean aspect of Jewish satire has faded over time as the focus has shifted from communal practices and experiences to Jews themselves and their daily lives, Jewish satire has remained, in each generation, focused on the way Judaism fits into the larger American monoculture. The contemporary satires are all much more about the minutiae of being a Jew while the third generation was focused on tackling the trappings of religion.

Whereas Hutcheon wanted to call satire negative and idealistic, Griffin both acknowledges the negative valence of satire, but then refocuses the meaning of that negativity by calling this satire “provocation,” and simultaneously establishing a category of positive satire which he calls “inquiry.”<sup>22</sup> Griffin describes satire in much broader terms than did Hutcheon, calling it: “problematic, open-ended, essayistic, ambiguous in its relationship to history, uncertain in its political effect, resistant to formal closure, more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about the pleasures it offers.”<sup>23</sup> For Griffin satire is about pushing and investigating, but as a tool it is more neutral than Hutcheon found it. This expansion of satire into “inquiry” and “provocation” allows it, according to Griffin, to share a boundary with philosophical and ethical writings, as opposed to the more common association of satire with polemical

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<sup>21</sup> Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 257.

<sup>22</sup> Griffin, *Satire*, 52.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> The negative or positive aspects of satire come from the intent of the one who is wielding it, not from the nature of satire itself.

Griffin uses the words “philosophical” or “ethical,” but then is it so much of a stretch to add “theological”? Though satire is not commonly thought to be a theological tool, if it is a cousin to ethics and philosophy then must we not also consider it related to theology as well? In general, Judaism has been allergic to the term “theology.” I am using it here not to make any particular political statement, but because if I am arguing that these satires are concerned with the form and function of religious ideas and practices then it seems the correct term to use. When Thing Theory is applied to satires of religion it almost necessarily implies a theological reimagining since it shows satire to be making statements about the meaning of religion and its place in the world. A making of Judaism into a Thing is equivalent, in many ways, to a “God is dead” proclamation because it posits that where there once was life, use, or value there now is none. So if the reading of the third generation’s satires as being driven to make Judaism into a Thing is valid, then an understanding of that process as both ethical and theological is potentially also valid.

Satire is furthermore not a static form in Griffin’s estimation. It is an “open” rather than a “closed” form, seeking to explore or inquire rather than declare or conclude.<sup>25</sup> Satire is not meant to answer questions, but to encourage thought and conversation. Griffin believes that “the satirist’s instinct is not to close off an argument but to think of another example, or a qualification, or a digression. The point is to keep moving...”<sup>26</sup> The satirist then is a provocateur, sometimes subtle, sometimes aggressive,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 95. the most expedient

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 113.

but always with a generative goal. Aggression does not have to mean violence; aggressive satire is not necessarily trying to kill the thing it is satirizing as much as it is forceful in its desire to make the audience see the flaws in the system. Satire aims to be revelatory, and it can do that gently or firmly, but in either case the end goal is understanding and change, not wanton destruction. Satire is not anarchy.

The satirist's aim is to move conversation forward and make people think in new ways. And, as mentioned, satire is highly referential, usually noting well-known people and events. The question of reference in satire, in Griffin's work at least, comes down to an over-simplified debate between New Criticism and New Historicism. New Criticism (in Griffin's estimation) saw satire as a self-contained verbal order which makes use of "fictions" and is concerned with universals, not particulars (timeless good vs evil rather than specific scoundrels). Wit and satire are therefore eternal because they are embodied in fictions.<sup>27</sup> New Historicism, on the other hand, emphasizes the referential nature of satire and therefore, in Griffin's scheme, the two views are incompatible. Satire cannot be both closed and referential; hence analysis of satire cannot be both New Critical and New Historical. I do not subscribe to the same hard-lined definitions Griffin does, and therefore I do not see the same inherent struggle between the two schools. Furthermore, despite Griffin's book being "recent," both schools of thought have changed and developed and produced off-shoots that make his distinction seem dated. I would argue that instead of the two over-simplifications being incompatible, that there is much more gray area to both schools of thought and that satire can bridge them both. It practices

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

“exemplary history,” aiming for general truths more than particular historical accuracy.<sup>28</sup>

In that way satire *can* in fact, be both referential and self-contained.

Finally, Griffin acknowledges the inherent difficulties in interpreting satire. He says that “satire proper, unlike ‘factual’ genres, rarely offers itself as ‘objective’ or documentary, and it thus presents the interpreter with special problems” such as seeing through the exaggeration satirists have license to use.<sup>29</sup> Griffin emphasizes that satire is a slippery beast, and reminds the interpreter not to get too hung up on fact; to remember to be flexible in her definitions. But at the same time he wants the interpreter to remember that “works of satire, like all literature, reflect and in some ways constitute the system of relationships (political, economic, legal) that governs a culture, distributes rewards, and controls access to power.”<sup>30</sup> Satire can and does both comment on culture and create culture. It is a generative force in the same way it is a theological force: because when you list all the things it is and does, you cannot help but acknowledge its creative power. This makes satire a perfect vehicle for the type of cultural transmission I am proposing. It is ideally-suited to be the form that makes Judaism into a Thing, hands down the Judaism-Thing from one generation to the next, *and* gives the new generation the very tools with which to make Judaism not a Thing again. It is both a cause and an undoing.

Let us turn now to an example of the way Jewish satire has been critiqued in the past, in order to illustrate the ways in which this undertaking will be both similar and different. In 1907 Israel Davidson wrote his dissertation at Columbia University, which he published the same year under the title *Parody in Jewish Literature*. It was limited to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 124-125.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 187.

formal parodies either in Hebrew or which mimic some Hebrew, and he makes an important point which still bears repeating: “those parodies, however, which were merely written by Jews, but are non-Jewish both in language and subject matter, do not come within the scope of this study.”<sup>31</sup> Then, as now, it was clear that simply being written by a Jew does not make something a “Jewish satire,” which then begs the question *must* a Jewish satire be written by a Jew, but that is a question for later in this examination.

Davidson seems to consider “Jewish satire” a *sui generis* category as he begins his text by calling his subject matter “that branch of Jewish satire which on account of its name goes by parody” which indicates that “Jewish satire” is simply an accepted fact.<sup>32</sup> Davidson also, however, seems to give some weight to the argument that Jewish satirists are “self-loathing Jews,” a term which was not in wide circulation in Davidson’s day so he would not have used it specifically.<sup>33</sup> What Davidson did say was that he “holds no brief for Jewish humorists, and does not pretend to defend them against the charge of obtaining laughter under false pretenses.”<sup>34</sup> Though this cliché held fast for nearly a century, the use of the term has waned in recent years, and it will be used in this work as an historical artifact, not a legitimate injunction.

Davidson recognized the dual nature of most Jewish satire. He believed his study would “reveal the serious side of Jewish humor. It will show that beneath the playfulness of Jewish satire an undercurrent of sadness is always present. Tears and laughter lie very closely together in Jewish humor, and the Jewish parodist is not always a mere clown, but

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<sup>31</sup> Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), ix.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Theodor Lessing’s *Der Jüdische Selbsthass* (Jewish Self-Hatred) was not published until 1930 and it was then that the term gained traction.

<sup>34</sup> Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, ix.

more often he is a preacher disguised in the garb of a jester.” Lawrence Epstein, as mentioned in the first chapter, seemed to be echoing Davidson when he described the “haunted smile” of Jewish comedians. Though in modern satire the sadness may be lessened, the undercurrent of pain is still present. It may manifest itself more as anger, or frustration, or political subversion, but the frown behind the smile is nonetheless as much a feature of contemporary satires as it was in Davidson’s day.

Yet on the power of satire Davidson is pessimistic. Unlike Hutcheon who attributes negativity to satire but not to parody, Davidson acknowledges that some parodies have “no other aim than to ridicule the style of its model” and that in such cases “the term parasitic may occasionally be applied with some degree of justice.”<sup>35</sup> He does not believe all parody is aimed at ridicule, but nonetheless he does allow for a category of parody which is strictly aggressive. Other parodies, however, are “used as a satiric weapon, charged with a moral purpose, full of wit and humor.”<sup>36</sup> But despite his acknowledgement of the moral purpose of much satiric material, he believes that “to say, however, that Jewish parody has exerted great influence on the evolution of Jewish morals or Jewish thought would be to exaggerate its importance beyond all reason.”<sup>37</sup> He writes off, with seeming ease, almost the entire satiric corpus when he says:

The early parodists, it must be admitted, had no other aim than to amuse, and those of later years, who tried to criticize or instruct succeeded but rarely in bringing about the desired result. Now and then some of them may have enhanced the general progress towards enlightenment, but for the greater part, the fate of the parodists was the fate of all humorists—not to be taken seriously. People laughed at their jokes, enjoyed their wit and sarcasm, but continued in their own ways just the same.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



Although Davidson does believe his study will throw some “light upon the social life of the Jews,” he does not think that satire itself had any generative or formative powers.<sup>39</sup> As emphasized already, other authors see satire as having definite ethical or philosophical power, which this analysis will argue may even be interpreted as theological, so Davidson’s belief that satire has had no influence on the evolution of Jewish thought in twentieth and twenty-first century America is diametrically opposed to this project. The American Jewish satires in this study give voice to the way three generations of American Jews feel about their religion and their religious identity. All the theories and methods employed in the following pages will be used with the goal of showing how satire has had and continues to have a very real effect on Jewish thought.

### **Allen and Heller: Some Background**

Woody Allen and Joseph Heller are good representatives of the third generation because their backgrounds are so different that it ensures that the trends I am identifying are not simply features of having been raised a certain way or in a certain place. Heller’s most famous work, *Catch-22*, is darkly comic, but is not in any identifiable way Jewish. Like many young Jews of his generation his parents were socialists and atheists, yet he still grew up in an almost entirely Jewish neighborhood. His Jewish upbringing was, therefore, both non-existent and totalized. When he turned toward Jewish themes and characters later in his career he was not taking Judaism for granted; it was something he sought out and studied in order to best use it in his fiction. Woody Allen had just the opposite experience. Both sets of his grandparents were immigrants, spoke Yiddish, and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., ix.

leaned towards Orthodoxy in their Judaism, which rubbed off on his parents.<sup>40</sup> Allen was raised in an observantly Jewish household, but as a young man rejected the religious indoctrination of his childhood. Because of his negative feelings about all things religious, however, he did not take Judaism for granted either. For Allen it was a monster running rampant through society and he was the solitary figure standing between it and an unsuspecting populace. He was armed with a keen satiric eye, and he turned it on religion over and over throughout the course of his career.

Both men must have seen scripture as one of the core aspects of Judaism, because that is one of the first places they turned their attention.<sup>41</sup> The meaning of the presence of the Bible as the core of Judaism is very different, however, because Allen and Heller think about religion and Judaism differently. Allen, of course, conflates all religion (including Judaism) with “organized religion” which he sees as the great evil of our modern world. The Bible, therefore, has a certain amount of complicity in all of religion’s crimes, because (at least in Allen’s estimation) Western religion would not exist without the Bible. Heller’s on the other hand, sees Judaism as being very biblically-centered in a more positive way, because it was to the Bible he turned when he decided to explore the religion of his youth, and so the Bible became the de facto center of his Jewish world. In some ways scripture is an easy target because it is fairly unchanging. Different translations and interpretations come along, certainly, but by and large it seems to be a closed canon and a stable set of references from which to draw, and if it is closed,

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<sup>40</sup> Eric Lax, *Woody Allen: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>41</sup> Allen’s parodic stories were written very early in his career, before he had any cinematic success to speak of and certainly before what most people consider to be his “golden age” from the later 1970s to the late 1980s. Heller was actually fairly late in his career, but was at the beginning of his literary relationship to Judaism.

it is also in danger of becoming a Thing. Certainly with the Bible the authors can assume a passing familiarity on the part of their readers. Allen edges further towards inside joke territory when he works with less well-known talmudic or hagiographic forms, but the Bible itself is also there in the work of both men. In some ways it appears to be the religious white whale they have to conquer before being able to take on other aspects of Jewish life and tradition.

To complicate matters further, the difference between Jewish “religion” and Jewish “culture” is a moving target and probably a false dichotomy. I want to return, for a moment, to Allen Guttman, because his denial of Jewish humor as a form (as discussed in the previous chapter) also highlights the centrality of the Bible in some people’s views of Judaism. Guttman acknowledges the Bible as the greatest Jewish book, so his idea of religion can be inferred to center around the Law and the practices and rituals directly linked to it. He holds the Bible to be almost sacrosanct, and believes that when authors parody or satirize the Bible they are taking “irreverent advantage of this almost humorless book.”<sup>42</sup> In two ways Guttman is evoking older, normative understandings of Judaism, the Bible, and their relationship to each other. First of all he is assuming the Bible to be humorless, which feminist scholars in particular have shown to be patently untrue.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, he is assuming that the only purpose in satirizing or even mocking the Bible is irreverence, the disputation of which is a core principle of this chapter.

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<sup>42</sup> Lax, *Woody Allen*, 330.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Athalya Brenner, ed., *Are We Amused? Humor about Women in the Biblical World*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, Supplement ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

So what if satirists are not taking advantage just for sport? What if what is happening in Allen, Heller, or Englander's writing is more than just irreverence? A closer analysis of these texts shows that beyond being simply a cultural artifact, beyond being "the product of the social situation of East-European Jews and a minority which maintained a precarious existence within the larger culture of Christendom" they rely on their knowledge of sacred texts to make their satiric points.<sup>44</sup> They demonstrate a deep knowledge and understanding of the holy texts of Judaism, and the humorists use that knowledge to sharpen their cultural critiques.

As mentioned above, one of the oldest theories of humor, going back at least to Thomas Hobbes, is "superiority theory" in which there is an "in group" and an "out group," and the laughter comes from recognizing yourself as part of the "in group." This can be very benign, for example, jokes aimed at adults in a children's movie, which are made all the funnier by the fact that you realize the children do not get it, or it can be quite divisive, in the case of racist or sexist jokes. Allen and Heller lean closer to the benign, with the "in group" being Jews or those who are immersed enough in Jewish life and culture to get the jokes. This highlights a fundamental tension in Allen's work in particular, for the majority of Allen's audience is actually not immersed enough in the traditional or "Old World" aspects of Judaism to fully get many of his jokes, but they nevertheless recognize that the joke is pitched to them, and that is enough to elicit the "in group" response. Sometimes you laugh because you think you should, and you are afraid to appear as though you *do not* get the joke and are not, in fact, part of the in group.

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<sup>44</sup> Allen Guttman, "Jewish Humor," in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 329.

One reason why the in group for Allen's humor in particular is difficult to pin down is because religion cannot be reduced to just God or scripture. And Judaism, as we have seen repeatedly, is impossible to define in simple terms. Mordecai Kaplan once described Judaism as "that religion that is an affirmation of life's worthwhileness, and which should not be tied up with any particular theology."<sup>45</sup> That same notion that Judaism cannot be limited to a narrow category of theological ideas continues to inform American Jewish identities. It is limiting the role of religion in Jewish culture to term something "not religious" solely because the author of a text (like Allen) avows atheism. Moreover, Allen and Heller's satires lose most of their bite if you view them as being simply cultural. Yes, they are satirizing complacent Jewish bourgeois assimilation, but if you see that as all they are doing you miss some of the most cutting critiques in which they engage with Jewish rituals, communities, and beliefs, not simply with stereotypes or neuroses. Full understanding of these satires require saturation in the rituals, beliefs, life cycles, and scholarship of Judaism.

### **Allen's Fiction**

It is not a stretch to say that when most people hear the name "Woody Allen" they think "actor," "director," "comedian," "producer," or "screenwriter" before they think "author." Though he has published short stories as recently as 2007, fiction is no longer something for which Allen is known. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, in the period

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<sup>45</sup> Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: The Jewish Theological Press, 2010), 330.

many consider the heyday of his filmmaking<sup>46</sup> he was a frequent contributor to magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Esquire* and published three fiction anthologies between 1970 and 1980. His primary literary alter-ego is very similar to the one who appears on film, a fellow described as “that hapless, feckless creature befuddled by gadgets, perplexed by a lack of faith, lusting for sexual encounters but scared to death of any emotional involvement.”<sup>47</sup> This lack of faith is a vital part of both the character Allen creates and his own admitted personal make-up. But a lack of faith is not the same thing as a lack of religion, and Allen has shown time and again throughout his work that religion has played an important role in making him the cultural critic he is today.

Literary critics have been generous with their praise of the depth and intelligence lurking below the surface of Allen’s fiction. Mark Berkey-Gerard claimed that, “by combining comedy with profound questions of morality, ethics, and religion, Allen is onto something—about us.”<sup>48</sup> Gary Commins understands that Allen’s rejection of religion comes not out of an ignorance of it, but too much experience of it. He says Allen understands that “cliches, empty words, especially when stamped with a religion’s seal of approval, are enemies of the human race.”<sup>49</sup> And yet, “again and again, despite being put off by mindless religious and philosophical trivia, Allen pursues God, or at least the idea of God.”<sup>50</sup> John Dart recognizes that Allen “poses basic religious or philosophical questions often ignored by the secularly oriented as “too deep” and skipped over by

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<sup>46</sup> Or, at least, his American filmmaking. Many people see his move to Europe in the past decade as ushering in a renaissance of his work, though the tone and subjects are quite different now.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur Cooper, “Allen the Author,” *Newsweek*, 23 June 1975, 87.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Berkey-Gerard, “Woody Allen & the Sacred Conversation: If God Has a Sense of Humor, Who Gets It?” *The Other Side* 33, no. 1 (1997): 60.

<sup>49</sup> Gary Commins, “Woody Allen’s Theological Imagination,” *Theology Today* 44, no. 2 (1987): 242.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

religionists engrossed in particular issues.”<sup>51</sup> And Todd Speidell writes that Allen “humorously and helpfully explores the uncertainty of faith in an all-loving and all-powerful God in light of the ambiguities of life, [and] he ultimately and ironically tends to resolve the ambiguity of faith living with doubt in favor of doubt alone.”<sup>52</sup>

What all of these critics share is that they were writing for Christian publications. Christians have recognized and either celebrated or fought against the deeply theological aspects of Allen’s work for nearly 40 years. Perhaps it takes a Christian understanding of theology to see that what Allen does absolutely requires an understanding of and fluency in religious Judaism. There has long been a love-hate relationship between Judaism and theology; search for “Jewish theology” and you will usually be redirected to “Jewish philosophy,” with the term “theology” being reserved for specific cases such as “Holocaust theology” or “process theology.” It is not surprising, then, that arguments about the theological nature of Allen’s work would not come from within Judaism. Dart even noted that in 1974 an evangelical Protestant magazine called *The Wittenburg Door* polled its readers to name the “theologian of the year” and Allen won, over runners-up Karl Barth, Jurgen Moltmann, and Pat Boone.<sup>53</sup> Satiric though the award may have been, it nevertheless shows recognition of the fact that Allen’s work can be interpreted theologically. All these assessments combined indicate that when Allen calls himself an atheist, his atheism represents a well-considered, constantly evaluated position that could not exist in isolation of the religious traditions of Judaism. His atheism is also a far cry from the “New Atheism” of modern skeptics. Allen no more trusts science than he does

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<sup>51</sup> John Dart, “Woody Allen, Theologian,” *The Christian Century*, 22-29 June 1977, 587.

<sup>52</sup> Todd H. Speidell, “God, Woody Allen, and Job,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 29, no. 3 (2000): 560.

<sup>53</sup> Dart, “Woody Allen, Theologian,” 585.

religion, for one thing. Recall the description of his standard character as “befuddled” by technology. And he has often expressed a great sadness over the lack of God in the universe. He does not necessarily feel that the world is better off without God; he simply feels that that is the world in which we find ourselves. Were there a God Allen would be quite pleased, it seems, because it would allow him to pose his questions about justice and suffering directly to someone. Just because it became manifestly true that God existed would not mean Allen would let God off the hook, but his statements on God indicate that he would be fine with being wrong. He is, you could say, a reluctant, or even theistic atheist.

Allen is also a mordant social critic. Though in much of his work Judaism is treated like some sort of comedic low-hanging fruit, and is every bit as superficial and cultural as critics makes it out to be his use of Jewish themes and subjects is actually part of a sharp critique of the American Jewish community of his day. Amongst the comedians of Allen’s generation there was a move towards Objectifying Judaism into something that was recognizable at all points, in everything their characters did. In Europe the *haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment, popularized the phrase “Be a Jew at home and a man in the street,” meaning that Judaism was something personal and private and in public Jews should act “like everyone else,” whatever that means.<sup>54</sup> This was a cornerstone of the Reform movement, and was a popular mindset for at least a century. But in the mid-twentieth century, when Jews began moving to the suburbs and out of ethnic or religious enclaves for the first time in centuries, social satirists such as Allen began to write characters who were Jews at home and Jews in the street. And at work.

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<sup>54</sup> The phrase comes from an 1866 poem by Judah Leib Gordon called “Hakiza ami,” or “Awake My People.” It was a call to Russian Jews to grab on to their share of the new rights that were being granted to Jews across Europe, but that line in particular became popular throughout the *haskala*.



And at the coffee shop. And at the mechanic. These were Jews who could not pretend to be anything else even if they wanted to. It inflected every word they said, every interpersonal interaction they had, and ceased to be anything like the religion of Judaism we have been discussing but instead became whatever this non-specific, popular conception of “cultural Judaism” was.

The move to the suburbs was more than just geographical. It effectively erased the final identity markers of the Eastern European immigrant community. The ethnically demarked neighborhoods crumbled, accents were lost or Americanized, and the effectively parochial education of predominantly Jewish public schools gave way to the melting pot model of multicultural schools in which a child or set of siblings might suddenly find themselves to be the “token Jews.” Much of Allen’s work in the 1970s and 1980s seems to reflect these dynamics. Allen’s writing indicates that he also sees in contemporary Judaism a flattening of history, especially among Jewish “authorities.” The uncritical blending of past and present draws some of Allen’s harshest critique. There are points in his work at which Allen shows just how much his religious upbringing stuck with him, and several of his short fiction pieces are every bit as midrashic as the rabbinic classics. They can actually be seen as a sort of constructive theology; he makes Judaism into a Thing to save it, in a sense. By using Judaism as a Thing, Allen forces aspects of Judaism back into the public, and especially the Jewish, eye. Allen’s Jews are highly assimilated, but he makes them think about scripture, remember Bible stories, and recall what they know of the Hassidim whereas normally there is every chance they would go through days, even weeks, without having to think about scripture. Although they are

seeing it through a satiric lens, Allen is nevertheless forcing it back on an otherwise organized religion-averse assimilated populace.

A great deal of Allen's fiction requires an understanding of religion, often an understanding of Judaism specifically, to grasp the humor fully. The story "No Kaddish for Weinstein," for example is "obviously a lampoon of [Allen] as well as the Bellow-Malamud loser" all of whom are "'so sad...They're all New York Jewish intellectuals, Communists, impotent.'" <sup>55</sup> So, on the one hand one must be well-read and well-versed in a certain Alfred Kazinesque New York City, left-wing, intellectual lifestyle to understand the characters, while on the other hand you need an understanding of the Kaddish prayer, specifically the Kaddish for the dead to which the title of the story refers to understand the frame. Similarly, in short stories like "Mr. Big" or short plays such as *God* an understanding of Jewish conceptions of God significantly increases an appreciation for the story. "Mr. Big" pays homage to the noir detective stories of the 1940s in which a young woman tries to hire a detective to find out who killed God. Allen is most likely drawing on Nietzsche's famous statement that "God is dead," but in his story it is the young woman herself who ends up being killed, so he is also echoing Richard Rubenstein's take on the death of God which argues that it is something that happened to humanity, not to God. <sup>56</sup> Even if Allen had not read Rubenstein (which it is likely he had not) the fact that he instinctively took the death of God in what Rubenstein sees as the Jewish direction is indicative of the ongoing influence his Jewish upbringing and surroundings play on him.

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<sup>55</sup> Cooper, "Allen the Author," 87.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xii.

Two stories in particular, however, demonstrate Allen's knowledge of and facility with Jewish religious texts. "Hassidic"<sup>57</sup> Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar," which was first published in *The New Yorker* and anthologized in *Getting Even* and "The Scrolls," which first appeared in *The New Republic* and was anthologized in *Without Feathers* (along with *God* and "No Kaddish for Weinstein"). They are both parodies of religiously- important textual forms in Judaism. In each Allen is not simply copying the form of the original; he is demonstrating that he also understands the importance of the original and the role it plays for the religious community that embraces it. In both pieces Allen is manipulating the boundary between real knowledge and the appearance of real knowledge, which is largely why these pieces work as satire and are not simply funny. The idea of intellectual "authority" bothers Allen nearly as much as religious authority does, and while he is not seen as being "anti-intellectual" in the same way he is seen as being anti-religion, academic are nonetheless a frequent target of his most cutting barbs.<sup>58</sup> Though these stories are prime examples of the "surreal quality bordering on chaos" that typified Allen's early written work, they nonetheless show that behind Allen's absurdism is a high level of cultural facility which allows him to write characters pretending, at least, to have significant religious knowledge.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> There are several different spellings of this word including "Hasidic," "Chasidic," "Hassidic" and "Chassidic." Because Allen uses "Hassidic" in the title of his story that is the spelling I will use throughout this chapter; however, when other sources are cited I have retained their individual transliterations.

<sup>58</sup> His quip in *Annie Hall* that "*Commentary* and *Dissent* had merged, forming *Dysentery*" is an excellent example of the short stabs he liked to take at the intellectual community.

<sup>59</sup> Don Nilsen, "Humorous Contemporary Jewish-American Authors," *MELUS* 21, no. 4 (1996), 74.

## Hassidic Tales

“Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar” was published fairly early in Allen’s career on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1970. It demonstrates, clearly and concisely, the role religion has played in bolstering Allen’s satire, and the way he is showing it to have outlived its usefulness. The story is a play on the classic genre of the Hassidic wonder story and hagiography. Though certain aspects of Hassidism have made their way into the zeitgeist, these stories are not commonly known, either by non-Jews or the majority of Jews. Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim* (1947) experienced a surge of popularity in the 1960s and 70s as the mysticism and spirituality of the stories offered a sort of Jewish alternative to the exploding popularity of Zen Buddhism, but it is still only within the most observant circles that these Hassidic tales are regularly read and given real weight. Nevertheless, some of the great Hassidic rebbes of the eighteenth and nineteenth century are known today primarily through the stories written about and attributed to them. Folktales had been one of the most popular literary forms in Eastern Europe prior to the appearance of Hasidism, and the rebbes continued to use them as a way to present complicated theological or mystical ideas to their functionally illiterate communities.<sup>60</sup>

Hassidic rebbes used this homiletical, story-telling form and the great ones had followers who recorded their words and preserved them for future generations. The Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760), the founder of modern Hassidism lived in the early to mid eighteenth century, and was the storyteller par excellence after whom the rebbes of the

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<sup>60</sup> Joseph Dan, “Preface,” in *Nachman of Bratslav: The Tales*, trans. Arnold J. Band, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, ed. Richard J. Payne (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), xiii.

late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries modeled themselves. Such is the case with Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810) whose disciple, Nathan, recorded many of his stories as well as writing hagiographic material describing Nachman's activities. The telling of these tales was of more than just allegorical importance to these rebbes and their followers. Nachman, for example, "conceived of the telling of tales as an act analogous to the redemption of the cosmos by God at the end of days."<sup>61</sup> These tales, therefore, have deep religious significance and it is the reverence and near worship followers of a rebbe feel for the rebbe's stories that Allen is parodying.<sup>62</sup>

Allen's story consists of six vignettes, each one comprised of a fictitious Hassidic tale and a corresponding analysis by the modern-day "Noted Scholar," who is never named. Gary Epstein's above quoted "Tales of the American Masters" also parodies the classic Hassidic hagiographic story although with perhaps a narrower scope for its satire. Epstein's work is described as not anti-Hassidic, as they might initially appear, but "are actually a parody of American Jews from an Orthodox perspective."<sup>63</sup> Epstein's parody and Allen's parody could therefore be seen as coming from opposite ends of the religious spectrum; one is Orthodox in origin and one is atheist in origin, but both draw on an understanding of the Hassidic story to craft their satiric message. Allen's pseudo-stories take on not just American Jews but also European traditions, yet it would nevertheless be a mistake to see his stories as "anti-Hassidic" in any way that was more oppositional than

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<sup>61</sup> Arnold Band, "Introduction," in *Nachman of Bratslav: The Tales*, trans. Arnold J. Band, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, ed. Richard J. Payne (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 38.

<sup>62</sup> Nachman is a good example of this. Most Hasidic groups are dynastic, with one rebbe being succeeded by a son, grandson, son-in-law, or favored disciple. The Bratslaver group, however, was so attached to Nachman and his tales that they never followed another rebbe and it is still his stories that guide the group to this day.

<sup>63</sup> Epstein, "Tales of the American Masters," 130, editor's note.

his views on all organized religious entities seem to be. For Allen, it could be argued, that Jews are victims in the sense that these texts have been forced upon them, generation after generation. Only by denuding and making the texts into a Thing can he liberate the people.

Epstein's stories are all simply in the form of the Hassidic tale itself. Allen's vignettes each have two parts; the tale and the "interpretation." The voice of the unidentified "Noted Scholar" is as critical a response to the more or less secular world of religious scholarship as the tales themselves are to religious literature. Sid Caesar's *Yiur Show of Shows* featured a number of clueless-pompous "experts" on various subjects, so if Allen did not borrow the model from Caesar directly, his Noted Scholar is certainly in the same mold.<sup>64</sup> Martin Buber's 1906 edition of Nachman's tales introduced Nachman's hagiography to a non-Hassidic audience, as well as popularizing the trend of a respected scholar glossing the tales for a lay reader. Buber's collection was translated into English in 1956, and American Jews largely accepted Buber's presentation of Hassidism as unquestionably "authentic" despite figures such as Chaim Potok criticizing Buber for presenting a romanticized vision of Hassidism which overlooked, "charlatanism, obscurantism, internecine quarrels, its heavy freight of folk superstition and pietistic excesses, its tzadik worship, its vulgarized and attenuated reading of Lurianic Kabbalah."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Allen actually started his career as a writer for Sid Caesar, who was notoriously hard to work for and rarely credited any of his writers specifically, so it is possible that Allen even wrote some of those sketches for Caesar, but unless Allen himself were to claim credit for them there is no way to know that for sure.

<sup>65</sup> Chaim Potok, Foreword to Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Random House, 1991), xii.

Allen seems to be similarly questioning the role of the “expert” in modern American Judaism.<sup>66</sup> His Jewish upbringing, along with being “a voracious reader,” gave stories such as “Hassidic Tales” a subtle flavor that “can be appreciated especially by those familiar with the pretentiousness of some religious...literature.”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the ongoing publication of portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which will be discussed at greater length shortly, added to a culture in which Americans worshipped every pearl of wisdom that dropped from an expert’s lip in much the same way Hassids had followed their rebbes. In both his fiction and his films Allen has, again and again, ridiculed Jewish traditions in order to highlight what he sees as the watering-down of Judaism in late-twentieth century America. Jewish texts are not worth the paper they are printed on, any more than any other aspect of religion is anything but a burden to the members of a religion. The reverence for the “expert” is, to Allen, just one more sign of the hypocrisy of organized religion and the complacency of bourgeois society, and he uses his knowledge to here mock not just a theological text, but the obsession with studying such texts as well.

The first story drops the name of Chelm into the first sentence. Chelm is a fictionalized version of a real town in Eastern Poland, which is an inside joke to those members of the reading audience who have some familiarity with traditional European Jewish folktales. Chelm stories suffered a decline in popularity as Yiddish literacy faded, but mid-century interest in Martin Buber’s translations of Hasidic tales corresponded to

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<sup>66</sup> This continued throughout the second half of the twentieth century as a great deal of effort went into the publication of new, “accessible” editions of many sacred texts with scholarly commentary intended to allow a lay audience to engage with difficult materials, making American Jews at least familiar with the concept of Hasidic stories, if not with the actual texts. See, for example, the *Gemara Shelemah*, Steinsaltz Talmud, Shottenstein Talmud, and *Talmud el Am*, among many others.

<sup>67</sup> Dart, “Woody Allen, Theologian,” 586.

an increase in English volumes of Chelm stories as well. Though Chelm is an actual town in eastern Poland ostensibly filled with no more foolish residents than any other town in the world, the Jews of Chelm are depicted as ignorant and foolish in Jewish folklore. An example of Chelmish logic looks like this: a man asks a resident of Chelm why the sea is salty. The Chelmite responded immediately “because of the herring. The herring is salted—and that makes the water salty, too.”<sup>68</sup> Allen begins his own story with a reference to Chelm, but in an inverted fashion. He writes that “A man journeyed to Chelm in order to seek the advice of Rabbi Ben Kaddish, the holiest of all ninth-century rabbis and perhaps the greatest *noodge* of the medieval era.”<sup>69</sup> The humor in the line is in the inversion of expectations, a theory of humor explained by D. H. Monroe, among others; one does not expect a great or wise rabbi to hail from Chelm, and neither does one expect to see him described as a “*noodge*,” a Yiddish term for a bore, or someone who asks unceasingly annoying questions. Allen satirizes the followers of the rebbe by taking what is normally the hagiography of a saintly figure and reducing him to a figure of ridicule, thereby putting those who would seek advice from such a figure even lower down the intellectual ladder.

The interpretation by the Noted Scholar follows the story itself. The Scholar begins by calling the question asked in the story “meaningless,” as well as the man who asked it. He continues: “Not that he was so far away from Chelm to begin with, but why shouldn’t he stay where he is? Why is he bothering Rabbi Ben Kaddish—the Rabbi

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<sup>68</sup> Solomon Simon, *The Wise Men of Helm*, trans. Ben Bengal and David Simon (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1973), 4.

<sup>69</sup> Woody Allen, *The Insanity Defense* (New York: Random House, 2007), 42.



doesn't have enough trouble?"<sup>70</sup> The Noted Scholar, we find, writes in stereotypically Yiddish-inflected prose. His use of questions: "why shouldn't he stay where he is?" "the Rabbi doesn't have enough trouble?" call to mind the speech pattern of a New York Jew, recently immigrated or at least still living in areas of first or second settlement. This is the dialect humor referenced by Dan Ben-Amos in the first chapter of this dissertation; though the shm-reduplication is absent here, the speech pattern of the Noted Scholar is nevertheless immediately recognizable, especially to a Jewish reader. The Noted Scholar is, underneath it all, no better than a Lower East Side tailor. He goes on to say that the violent response the Rabbi has to the petitioner, namely bashing him over the head with a candlestick, "according to the Torah, is one of the most subtle methods of showing concern."<sup>71</sup>

The second story involves similar inversion techniques. In this one we are introduced to a rabbi "who was said to have inspired many pogroms with his sense of humor."<sup>72</sup> The idea that humor could result in violence against Jews is jet black comedy, especially for someone like Allen who makes his living through popular humor. It must be pointed out, however, that he is careful not to specify what caused the pogroms; he says only "with his sense of humor," which could mean the rabbi was humorless as easily as it could mean he was a jokester, though the latter is the immediate assumption of most readers. This rabbi is asked whether God prefers Abraham or Moses. He initially says Abraham, and when questioned further says Moses. This causes his disciple to take away the lesson that it was a stupid question, to which the rabbi responds: "Not only that, but

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

you're stupid, your wife's a *meeskeit*, and if you don't get off my foot you're excommunicated."<sup>73</sup> As with the first story, the satire of the adoration of these Hassidic *tzaddikim* comes through the depiction of them as fairly despicable people. If Hassidism is a stand-in for Judaism in general here, Allen is clearly implying that all Jews have been duped, and are following people and traditions that are unworthy of such loyalty. This rebbe insults both the petitioner and his wife (*meeskeit* being a term for an ugly woman) and threatens the man with excommunication. The humor is, as we have seen throughout, operating on several levels at once; those who understand the meaning of words such as *meeskeit* get to feel "in," and the inversion of expectations pulls the rug out from under the normative expectation of what a *tzaddik* should be.

The Noted Scholar concurs with this description of the rabbi, who would have a difficult time making the value judgment he is being asked to make in part because he "has never read the Bible and has been faking it."<sup>74</sup> There are multiple valences to this sentence. On the one hand, Allen is ridiculing those who follow this *tzaddik* for putting so much faith in a man whom the Noted Scholar has revealed to be a charlatan. On the other hand, Allen could be seen as making a self-deprecating comment, although it is clear from this and other writings that he is much more religiously well-read than he wishes to let on. For example, when asked in an interview once if he were an agnostic he responded: "...I know as little about it as anyone, you know?"<sup>75</sup> Much like the line about the rabbi's sense of humor, the immediate effect of this statement is not precisely what is being said. Though that reads as an acknowledgement of religious illiteracy, if he knows

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> William Geist, "The Rolling Stone Interview—Woody Allen," *Rolling Stone*, 9 April 1987, 40.

as little as anyone he also knows as much as anyone. He did go to Hebrew School and had a fairly rigorous religious upbringing.<sup>76</sup> He can claim ignorance, but he is not, in fact, the pretender expert who never read the Bible. He is the pretender neophyte who knows the Bible fairly well.

Another point Allen makes is the complete loss of touch the Noted Scholar seems to have with reality. He depicts the Scholar as conflating modern Jewish culture with the biblical experience in a way that blurs the line between past and present.<sup>77</sup> The Noted Scholar says, in his interpretation of the second tale, that “It should also be noted that to step on a rabbi’s foot (as the disciple does in the tale) is a sin, according to the Torah, comparable to the fondling of matzos with any intent other than eating them.”<sup>78</sup> Were it not a ridiculous statement for other reasons one would immediately realize it was farce as there are no rabbis in the Hebrew Bible so not stepping on their feet—or any other part of their anatomies—is not a biblical injunction. Allen, however, is mocking what he sees as a trend in scholarship to assume that what is considered “Jewish” today is by definition consonant with all periods of the Jewish past. This could also be seen as Thing-making, as most contemporary Jews would say that the religion of the Bible is anachronistic and not applicable to modern life in its literal form, but Allen is saying that you are fooling yourself if you think there is actually a difference between biblical and modern religion—both are equally outdated and unable to address modern existence.

Jewish self-importance in the post-war period is also a target of Allen’s pen. In the fourth tale he describes the rebbe as “unanimously hailed as the wisest man of the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>77</sup> This is, of course, not unlike what Guttman has done in insisting that something must be consistent with biblical experience to be termed “Jewish” today.

<sup>78</sup> Allen, *Insanity Defense*, 43-44.

Renaissance by his fellow Hebrews, who totaled a sixteenth of 1 percent of the population.”<sup>79</sup><sup>80</sup> In Allen’s day Jews totaled about 2.7% of the total American population<sup>81</sup> and .3% of the world population.<sup>82</sup> Not, obviously, a sixteenth of 1%, but still a very tiny percentage of the population as a whole. Allen’s point, however, is clear. The odds of the wisest man of the Renaissance coming from a group that small are, well, .0625%. And yet, the idea that the Jews would believe the wisest man of the Renaissance came from amongst their tiny numbers is, at least to Allen, to be expected. Jews in America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been disproportionately represented in many fields and within the academy, where the Noted Scholar lives. “Jewish-American” literature, culture, etc. has been seen as equally—if not more—important as its African-American, Asian-American, or Latin-American counterparts.<sup>83</sup>

It is in the final tale that Allen reveals his view on the whole enterprise of the Hassidic miracle story. The Noted Scholar responds to this tale of a rebbe who has miraculous dreams and magical experiences by saying that “the above small masterpiece amply illustrates the absurdity of mysticism.”<sup>84</sup> Mysticism is the basis of much of the Hassidic theology, and if even a Noted Scholar in the field finds it absurd, who can argue

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>80</sup> It is unclear whether this is the same 9<sup>th</sup> century “medieval” rebbe, but if he is it is a further poke at the credibility of the scholar who does not know that the 9<sup>th</sup> century is not generally considered medieval, or that neither of them are the Renaissance. As before, it is just wrong enough to be funny.

<sup>81</sup> “Jewish Population in the United States, 1974,” in *The American Jewish Year Book, 1976* (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1976), 229-238.

<sup>82</sup> Jewish population from “World Jewish Population,” in *The American Jewish Year Book, 1983* (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1983), 273-279. World population from “1975,” *Wikipedia*, online at <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1975#World\\_population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1975#World_population)> (accessed 11 March 2015).

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Jennifer Glaser, “The Politics of Difference and the Future(s) of Jewish American Literary Studies,” *Prooftexts* 29 (2010): 474-484, who argues that Jewish-American literature should be studied amongst the other “ethnic studies.”

<sup>84</sup> Allen, *Insanity Defense*, 47.

against that? In four brilliantly composed sentences Allen explains the Noted Scholar's position: "The Rabbi dreams *three* straight nights. The Five Books of Moses, subtracted from the Ten Commandments leaves five. Minus the brothers Jacob and Esau leaves *three*. It was reasoning like this that led Rabbi Yitzhok Ben Levi, the great Jewish mystic, to hit the double at Aqueduct fifty-two days running and still wind up on relief."<sup>85</sup>

This kind of numerological reasoning is familiar to many Jews, as it is woven throughout liturgies such as the Passover Seder.<sup>86</sup> But Allen, through the Noted Scholar, is saying that not only is it all absurd, but there is no higher purpose for it if rabbis are using this reasoning to win at horse racing. And even then, the rabbi in question still ended up destitute, so what, Allen asks, is the point of it all? What does structured religion give you if a great rabbi ends up indigent? Judaism is a religion and religion is a Thing and Things have no purpose.

### The Scrolls

"The Scrolls" was originally published in the liberal political magazine *The New Republic* in August of 1974 and anthologized in *Without Feathers* published in 1975. In this, one of his more well-known fiction pieces, Allen applies the same model he utilized in "Hassidic Tales" to the Bible by way of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He introduces the archaeological find using a similar (though not named) voice to the Notable Scholar of the Hasidic Tales. He then reproduces three fragments of the find, two of which mimic actual biblical passages from Job and Genesis, and a third which seems to be a whole

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Particularly the varying interpretations as to how a verse about a "strong hand, outstretched arm, great manifestation, signs and wonders" equate the Ten Plagues of the Exodus story.

cloth invention. He concludes with a short series of “Laws and Proverbs,” written in the one-liner style of the Book of Proverbs. Although he does not append an interpretation to each piece, it is still possible to glean his social and religious critiques, which are aimed at the insatiable public appetite for “origins,” regardless of whether these ur-texts have any actual meaning.

“The Scrolls” draws largely upon incongruity to build its humor, which in turn presents the reader with a strong sense of irreverence on the part of the author/narrator. For example, in the first sentence we are told that a shepherd discovered a cave containing “several large clay jars and also two tickets to the ice show.”<sup>87</sup> On the surface this is a simple mash-up of something religiously important with something quite secular. There is also a subtle dig at the scholarly community, not unlike those he made in “Hassidic Tales.” He begins “The Scrolls” by noting that “Scholars will recall that” several years ago these scrolls were found. Despite the fact that “for a while everyone talked about the Dead Sea Scrolls,” Allen is focusing on the response of the scholarly community to the find.<sup>88</sup> In doing so he is implicating them in an elaborate hoax through the anachronistic pairing of the clay jars and the ice show tickets.

He makes this point again in the second paragraph when he writes that the “authenticity of the scrolls is currently in great doubt, particularly since the word ‘Oldsmobile’ appears several times in the text, and the few fragments that have finally been translated deal with familiar religious themes in a more than dubious way.”<sup>89</sup> The anachronistic incongruity of the Oldsmobile is the obvious humor in the sentence, but the

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<sup>87</sup> Allen, *Insanity Defense*, 135.

<sup>88</sup> David Brudnoy, “Without Feathers,” *The Saturday Evening Post* 247, no. 9 (1975): 86.

<sup>89</sup> Allen, *Insanity Defense*, 135.

second half of the sentence, the dubious treatment of religious themes, is less clearly designed to elicit a chuckle from the reader. His decision to deal at all with “religious themes” is noteworthy, but the acknowledgement that there are “familiar” treatments to these themes and that Allen and the reader should both know what those familiar treatments are without further explanation indicate the debt a story such as this one owes to a traditional religious upbringing and scriptural literacy. Although even the casual reader can pick up on hints such as “ice show” or “Oldsmobile,” only someone with actual experience with scripture, and specifically Jewish hermeneutics thereof, can fully appreciate the satire of such a story.

Finally, Allen concludes the introduction to the fragments themselves by saying “excavationist A.H. Bauer (always fun for third generation satirists to make Germans look silly, c.f Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks, etc) has noted that even though the fragments seem totally fraudulent, this is probably the greatest archaeological find in history with the exception of the recovery of his cuff links from a tomb in Jerusalem.”<sup>90</sup> This follows the same structure as the previous examples; the humor is derived from the incongruity of the statement, in this case the recovery of a pair of cuff links being on par with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but the satire is in the critique of an academic view of the world. The narrator’s tone in explaining the importance of the find despite it almost certainly being fraudulent is unironic, however that highlights the irony with which the authorial voice is treating the situation. The solipsism of academia renders those within it too self-involved to recognize the difference between what has value and what is

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 135-136.

worthless, and, at least as far as this implied author is concerned, the ability to flaunt their own professional expertise trumps the legitimacy of the actual work.

The first “fragment” is a parody of the biblical Book of Job. Job was represented among the Dead Sea Scrolls, albeit in a very marginal manner as only 2 verses (33:28-30) were identified.<sup>91</sup> Allen, however, puts Job front and center in his scrolls.<sup>92</sup> This would probably mean very little to a casual reader; Job is a popular story, at least on the level of major themes so it offers a fairly familiar entry into the form of biblical parody being undertaken. A reader more than casually familiar with scripture would recognize more quickly where Allen was drawing on the biblical text itself and where he was inserting his own voice. In this instance, Allen uses the actual text of the Bible extremely sparingly; he primarily relies on the fact that almost everyone knows that bad things happened to Job, and that the details are unimportant. Though marked by the same incongruous humor as has been identified previously, to see this story as simply silly is to miss the dark tones underlying the foolish veneer.

Reviewer Richard Boston, for example, called Allen’s whole collection “hopeless” following the logic of Emily Dickenson that hope is a thing (Thing?) with feathers (the collection, remember, is called *Without Feathers*). And within this hopeless book, Boston calls this retelling of Job “deflating.”<sup>93</sup> Here there is no prologue, Job is gunning for God almost right away. Allen says that: “Once the Lord, while wreaking

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<sup>91</sup> An additional targum of Job was recovered at Qumran, however this does not seem to be anything Allen is using in his parody.

<sup>92</sup> Jason Kalman has written an entire essay on Allen’s use of Job and its relationship to Holocaust Theology. See Jason Kalman, “Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust,” in *Jews and Humor*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Studies in Jewish Civilization, no. 22 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007), 175-194. Kalman argues, similarly to my argument, that Allen’s “comedy offers a serious theological discourse intended to confront the problem of maintaining the belief that God is just and compassionate in the face of the Holocaust.”

<sup>93</sup> Richard Boston, “Woody, Bill, and Spike,” *Punch*, 6 October 1976, 593.



havoc upon his faithful servant, came too close and Job grabbed him around the neck and said, ‘Aha! Now I got you! Why are thou giving Job a hard time, eh? Eh? Speak up!’”<sup>94</sup> Allen’s Job is a far cry from the long-suffering paragon of virtue in the Christian Bible, and combines the defiance of the original Job with Jacob’s experience of wrestling physically with the divine.<sup>95</sup> It is also noteworthy that Allen does not capitalize his deity-related pronouns. Even in fiction, where Allen is speaking through his constructed characters, he maintains his independence from religious dogma. The contradiction in his simultaneously showing his familiarity with scripture and refusing to use the traditionally honorific capital letters to refer to God shows the complexity in Allen’s relationship to religion, and reflects the larger trend of “reluctant atheism” throughout post-Holocaust literature.

God asks Job to release him but Job “showed no mercy” and continues to scream at God about all God has done to Job, while keeping God in a choke hold. Finally, God fights back. In a summary of the final few chapters of Job, which contains one of the Bible’s great monologues, God demands of Job: “Must I who created heaven and earth explain my ways to thee? What hath thou created that thou doth dare question me?”<sup>96</sup> In Allen’s story, despite Job having manhandled and yelled at God he does not back down in the face of God’s wrath. ““That is no answer!”” Job says “then Job fell to his knees and cried to the Lord ‘Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory. Thou hast a good

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<sup>94</sup> Allen, *Insanity Defense*, 136.

<sup>95</sup> Although “the patience of Job” is a Christian theological concept (James 5:11)—in reality Job is not especially patient—the phrase has entered the common lexicon similarly to things like “turn the other cheek” or “the meek shall inherit the Earth” such that many Jews know the idea, without probably knowing its precise origins.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137

job. Don't blow it.”<sup>97</sup> The idea that God could potentially lose God's job is emblematic of Allen's strand of particularly theistic atheism; Allen does not reject the idea of God, he simply regrets that there is not one. If there were one, on the other hand, Allen does not see why God would have any more job security than anyone else. That's life.

For a man who proclaims not to believe in God Allen spends a great deal of time writing about God. In his film *Love and Death*, for example, he wrote the following line for himself: “You know, if it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil. I think that the worst you can say about him is that, basically, he's an underachiever.”<sup>98</sup> The relationship between God and Job in his story is one of many examples of Allen wrestling with traditional notions of divinity. Though he has said that “the universe is godless,”<sup>99</sup> he has also said that “it's a damn shame that the universe doesn't have any God or meaning... you can only lead [a moral life] if you...shuck off all the fairy tales that lead you to make choices in life that you're not really making for moral reasons but for taking down a big score in the afterlife.”<sup>100</sup> Case in point, the second “fragment” in this story deals even more explicitly with the relationship between God and humanity.<sup>101</sup> Fragment two is a riff on Genesis 22, known as the Akedah, or the Binding of Isaac.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> *Love and Death*, prod. Charles H. Joffe, dir. Woody Allen, 85 min. (United Artists, 1975), DVD.

<sup>99</sup> Eric Lax, *Conversations with Woody Allen* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 358.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>101</sup> Although this may be reading too much into Allen's critique, he is dancing around some of the same serious discussions that were happening in post-Holocaust theology in the early 1970s. Eliezer Berkovits, for example, used the figure of Job in *Faith After the Holocaust* (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing, 1973), describing contemporary Jews as being like Job's brother; they are close to the victim without being the victim. “The Scrolls” came out the following year, and even if Allen did not read Berkovits' book he could have come across discussions of it in the *New York Times* or in *Commentary*.

One of the challenging aspects of the story as written in Genesis is what, if anything, Isaac knew about what was going on and why he was basically silent throughout the ordeal. Isaac, in fact, never speaks to his father again in the actual biblical narrative. In Allen's version, however, Isaac is very much aware from the beginning what it is God is asking of Abraham and he is, shall we say, skeptical about the whole enterprise. Sarah is similarly aware of the situation in Allen's narrative, whereas the biblical narrative leaves it unclear as to whether she ever knew what transpired. Allen's Sarah asks, practically: "How doth thou know it was the Lord and not, say, thy friend who loveth practical jokes..."<sup>102</sup> Abraham, however, is not to be denied and replies: "because I know it was the Lord. It was a deep, resonant, voice, well modulated (sic), and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that."<sup>103</sup>

In this Abraham is the opposite of Job. Job fought back against God. Far from being overawed, Job was resistant and stood his ground. Abraham is, of course, the Knight of Faith. While Sarah and Isaac question God's will, Abraham is steadfast in his belief that his orders come from the well-modulated voice that could only belong to God and that he is going to act according to that voice's instructions. Even when Sarah comes out and questions Abraham's actions he says he must obey, "for to question the Lord's word is one of the worst things a person can do with the economy in the state it's in."<sup>104</sup> Allen's Abraham may have funnier lines, but he is not substantially different than the Abraham found in Genesis. He is unwavering in his devotion to God and will not be deterred from what he believes he has been ordered to do, no matter how dreadful it may

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<sup>102</sup> Allen, *Insanity Defense*, 137.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

seem. It is interesting, in fact, how little Allen has changed the basic character of Abraham, especially coming as it does on the heels of his version of Job.

It is what happens at the dénouement of the story that shows the difference in Allen's approach to the Akedah situation. The dialogue between God and Abraham bears reproduction in its entirety:

And so [Abraham] took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham's hand and said, "How could thou doest such a thing?"

And Abraham said, "But thou said—"

"Never mind what I said," the Lord spoke. "Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?" And Abraham grew ashamed. "Er—not really...no."

"I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it."

And Abraham fell to his knees. "See, I never know when you're kidding."

And the Lord thundered, "No sense of humor. I can't believe it."

"But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?"

And the Lord said, "It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice."

And with that the Lord bid Abraham get some rest and check with Him tomorrow.<sup>105</sup>

Abraham is as true and faithful as ever, but instead of being rewarded for his faith and promised a great nation of descendants he is chastised and ridiculed by God. The fact that God is even present in this scene is noteworthy, as in the Bible it is not God but an angel who speaks to Abraham. The scroll gives credence to the more popular, less accurate notion that it was God who stopped the sacrifice. Allen's God has no patience for blind faith, nor does he want followers without a sense of humor. John Dart argues that for Allen, "the joke takes the place of a maxim, a Bible text, if you will, or 'moral of the story.'"<sup>106</sup> But what if the joke is the Bible text itself? Allen has done little to the character of Abraham outside of modernizing his speech a bit, and yet he has become a

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Dart, "Woody Allen, Theologian," 589.

joke. But the overarching theme is obviously that humanity is gullible and has been taken in by a “well-modulated voice” to the extent that even that voice would say they should be thinking more for themselves. As mentioned above, Allen’s view seems to be that people, in this case Jewish people, are victims of religion. Religion has long outstayed its welcome, but it is continuing to exert undue and unhelpful influence on people. Throw off the shackles of God and the Bible, Allen says, because religion itself has no more power over you. Even God thinks your blind faith is a little pathetic.

The final fragment is not based on any actual biblical passage, and there were, of course, many fragments in the Dead Sea Scrolls which do not match biblical verses. It involves a down on his luck tailor who prays to God for help and is rewarded with the advice (no doubt given in a resonant, well-modulated voice) to sew an alligator onto the pocket of each shirt he makes. And lo! He is a success. This is a very short piece, with little substance other than yet another dig at humanity’s expectations of God and the idea that God would drop by and whisper “plastics!” in a desperate man’s ear. Similarly, the Proverbs section is more cute than important. The final aphorism, “My Lord, my Lord! What hast thou done, lately?” hearkens back to both the end of the Job fragment—God’s job security is only as good as God’s most recent actions, and those may leave something to be desired—as well as Jesus’ invocation of Psalm 22 (Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46) during the crucifixion.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, when viewed as a whole “The Scrolls” does indicate Allen’s continued intellectual involvement with Judaism, and simultaneous rejection of it as a viable modern phenomenon. Insofar as scripture is a rich mine for

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<sup>107</sup> Allen, *Insanity Defense*, 140.

material it may actually be less of a Thing to Allen than to some of those reading his stories.

Which is not to say that it indicates Allen is less an atheist than he claims. But, as earlier quotations indicate, it is an atheism that wishes there were a God one could either choose to argue with, or deliberately reject. Allen wishes atheism were a choice instead of a fact. His atheism was formed by coming through a traditional Jewish upbringing, as opposed to being raised without religious ideals. Mark Berkey-Gerard said, “Allen’s use of biblical characters and religion for his comedy is, without a doubt, irreverent. And questions of human existence are not solved by making fun of possible revelation. But at the same time, comedy reminds us that religious history is filled with people with the same idiosyncrasies, sex drives, and neuroses we have.”<sup>108</sup> Yes, part of what Allen does is humanize and therefore mock God and organized religion. But he is also humanizing figures who are all too often seen as perfect, which is a very Jewish thing to do. Allen is, basically, doing midrash. Funny midrash, sure, but midrash nonetheless. If, however, he were to enter a competition for authors giving biblical heroes feet of clay he would finish a distant second (if that) to Joseph Heller.

### **Heller’s Fiction**

It is not surprising that Joseph Heller rarely, if ever, makes it onto lists of the top Jewish American authors. He does not fly his Jewish flag the way Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud and even Herman Wouk do. But although his corpus as a whole may not be the most Jewishly-influenced, the evolution of Judaism in his writing makes him an excellent

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<sup>108</sup> Berkey-Gerard, “Woody Allen & the Sacred Conversation,” 63.

subject for analysis. Heller was born in 1923 to Russian immigrant parents living in Coney Island, New York. Whereas Allen describes coming from a traditionally religious family, Heller's upbringing was more "socialist and agnostic" and his parents "saw that the boy was not raised in traditional Jewish ways" meaning that "the family did not keep kosher, the child did not celebrate becoming a bar mitzvah."<sup>109</sup> Any Judaism that was practiced in his youth was strictly for show: "His mother made him say Kaddish [for his father] at a nearby synagogue but this was, in Heller's words, 'more to keep up traditional good appearances than from a belief that a prayer from me would be of much help to either my father or the Lord.'"<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, though Jewish practice was perhaps lacking in his upbringing, an immersion in Jewishness was not. "After all, the 'Jewish experience' was all around him, as natural and omnipresent as the air one breathed."<sup>111</sup> The result of this was a childhood in which, according to Heller, "everyone I knew was Jewish. I never realized that I was Jewish until I was practically grown-up."<sup>112</sup>

Heller served as a pilot in the Air Corps in World War II, mainly on the Italian Front. His experiences in the war formed the basis of his first novel, *Catch-22* which was published in 1961. Though *Catch-22* has been hailed as one of the great novels of the twentieth century, there have been those who have criticized its scope, or lack thereof. It is a dark, often absurdist commentary on bureaucracy and the ridiculousness of war which was embraced as prophetic by the Vietnam-era youths who encountered it in the 1960s. But at the same time, it is a novel of World War II, by a Jewish author, which

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<sup>109</sup> John Friedman and Judith Ruderman, "Joseph Heller and the 'Real' King David," *Judaism* 36 (1987): 296-297

<sup>110</sup> Sanford Pinsker, "How 'Jewish' Is Joseph Heller?" *Jewish News*, 10 September 1998, 50.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

does not deal with or even mention the Nazi death camps and the extermination of European Jewry. One critic was disappointed to see that even at the end of his life, when he published the autobiographical *Now and Then* (1998; Heller died in 1999), he still did not own up to the glaring lacuna in *Catch-22*. Sanford Pinsker writes that he “had expected more, if not quite ‘regret’ that *Catch-22* papered over serious matters with high energy and dark comedy, then at least some recognition that the Holocaust is now a part of every sensitive person’s moral landscape.”<sup>113</sup> In truth, Heller can hardly be blamed for *Catch-22* not being a “Holocaust story.” When the book was written the term “Holocaust” was not even being used yet, and the book takes place mostly in Italy, which, while not a safe place for Jews, was hardly the center of Nazi activity. Pinsker felt that, in retrospect, Heller should have had *something* to say about the Nazi genocide.

Clearly, that is a critique, although in 1961 not every author, even every Jewish author, wrote the Holocaust into their stories. For some critics it was hard to imagine writing a novel about World War II, especially one with a Jewish protagonist (or not, as allegedly Yossarian “is Jewish in the first draft but becomes non-Jewish in the final version”), and not at least address the Holocaust.<sup>114</sup> Heller’s writing did, nevertheless, become more Jewish as his career progressed. His third novel, *Good as Gold* (1979), revolves around an explicitly Jewish protagonist for the first time. Though his favorite themes of alienation, existentialism, absurdism, and despair run throughout his fiction, his characters and settings did take a decidedly Jewish turn in the 1970s. This is an example of the way the satirists of the third generation were not rejecting religion, they were using it at first as a tool, and then ultimately making it a Thing it as they came to

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Friedman and Ruderman, “Joseph Heller and the ‘Real’ King David,” 297.



understand its uselessness to their generation. Some Jews, like Allen, did formally reject the religion of their youth. But some, like Heller, rose from the agnostic socialism of the 1930s and actually came to embrace Jewishness—if not Judaism—as time went on.

Nowhere is this truer for Heller than in his fourth novel, *God Knows*. He wrote this in the early 1980s and while the writing of it was interrupted by his eight-month struggle with Guillain-Barre syndrome he claims that his brush with death and subsequent weakness did not impact the tone of the book. In fact, he claims that even before he had a hint of his coming illness he intended David to be frail, frightened, and angry as he stared firmly at the end of his life. ““This time,”” he once said, ““I was a prophet.””<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, in much the same way Nathan Zuckerman’s age has kept pace with Philip Roth’s, Heller’s protagonists have aged with him. *God Knows* is a look at death and decrepitude as it is told from the death bed of the protagonist. It uses first-person narration and flashbacks to create movement back and forth between the protagonist’s present and his past. And what a past it was. A life full of drama and intrigue, death and betrayal, war and plenty of love it is, in the words of the opening narration, “the best story in the Bible.”<sup>116</sup> Yes, the Bible. Because *God Knows* is the story of King David as the world has never seen him before.

### **God Knows**

Heller’s fourth novel is racy, funny, irreverent, and touching. It is more than a fictionalization of the story of King David, a man who is one of the great biblical heroes

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<sup>115</sup> Walter Goodman, “Heller Talks of Illness and King David Book,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1984, 13.

<sup>116</sup> Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 5.

and yet, as he tells us repeatedly in this first-person narrative, a man after whom no biblical book is named. Arthur Cooper summarized the novel best when he said, “More than a zany, sexy, poignant retelling of David’s story, the novel is a modern allegory about what it’s like for a Jew trying to survive in a hostile world.”<sup>117</sup> Heller’s protagonist may be David, but he is also Heller and every other member of Heller’s aging generation. They are facing their own decrepitude and mortality and being a king does not exempt you from suffering. David in the Bible is brash, young, beautiful, and sensitive through most of the narrative. Heller’s David acknowledges he was all those things and more, claiming he was also thoughtful, loving, desperate for paternal pride and affection, misunderstood, plagiarized by everyone from Solomon to Shakespeare, and, most of all, lonely. The satire in this case is more similar to Allen’s than it might appear on the surface. David is taken from being a figure of myth and mystery who spoke to God and sealed the eternal, unconditional covenant into a crotchety, cranky, randy old man who hates his sons and cannot get warm. Like Allen, Heller is showing that blind faith gets you nothing but shackled to a tradition that long ago lost its vital purpose.

Heller’s method of doing midrash is, in some ways, the opposite of Allen’s. Though they are both clearly plumbing traditional Jewish texts for laughs—Jonathan Kirsch called *God Knows* a “comic masterpiece of midrash”—Heller’s motivation and process moves in the opposite direction from Allen’s.<sup>118</sup> Though many if not most of Allen’s films have autobiographical elements, his short stories do not strike the reader as especially drawn from life. It has already been mentioned that Heller’s protagonists aged

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<sup>117</sup> Arthur Cooper, “Catching up with Joseph Heller,” *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, August 1984, 231.

<sup>118</sup> Jonathan Kirsch, “Joseph Heller’s daughter gets the final word,” *Jewish Journal*, 21 September 2011, online at <[http://www.jewishjournal.com/twelve\\_twelve/article/joseph\\_hellers\\_daughter\\_gets\\_the\\_final\\_word\\_20110921/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/twelve_twelve/article/joseph_hellers_daughter_gets_the_final_word_20110921/)> (accessed 11 March 2015).

as he did, but some critics have gone further and seen the central relationship of *God Knows*, that of David and Bathsheba, as allegorically related to Heller's own marriage.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, whereas Allen came from a traditional Jewish education and, though he has rejected religion cannot reject the education that formed his intellectual development, Heller was not raised in an especially religious way and he claims he had very little knowledge of scripture before he had the idea for this novel. Heller immersed himself in Jewish texts in order to write this book, but if David is, in fact, Heller in some way then Heller's rapprochement with Jewishness also came with a rejection of both God and scripture. One of the central themes of the book is David's loss of God, so Heller is potentially showing that the only way forward is through a dismissal of that which is a Thing; lose God in order to rebuild something that *does* have purpose in your life.

Heller claims that the "idea for *God Knows*...came, like the ideas for all his novels, in the form of a sentence."<sup>120</sup> In this case the sentence was "I have the best book in the Bible." As cited above, the sentence that actually made it into the novel is "I have the best *story* in the Bible," because when the sentence came to Heller he did not even realize there was no Book of David. As Heller describes it "'I went to the Bible. Where was David? He was in the books of Samuel. God is not a good editor.'"<sup>121</sup> So Heller read the Bible and "picked up a one volume encyclopedia of the Bible and an exegesis of the Old Testament" and then began writing.<sup>122</sup> His relationship to the text is, therefore, different from Allen's. Heller was not raised with religion. He sought it out as an adult

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Goodman, "Heller Talks of Illness and King David Book," 13.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

and committed to it as a means to an end as much as a religious text. Scripture is actually an object to Heller and not a Thing, because scripture is his way into this story. This is an interesting division between the material trappings of religion and the ideas behind a religion, which will be discussed at greater length in chapter four. But that Heller can see great utility in the text while simultaneously showing the futility of traditional reverence for the text is a nuance that ought not be overlooked.

Which is not to say, however, that he did not appreciate the religious status of his source material. As Walter Clemons explains it: “Heller’s irreverence masks reverence for the text he reworks. He clearly relishes the grandeur of the Biblical narrative, and he is operating in the homely, honorable tradition of the medieval mystery plays.”<sup>123</sup> If, indeed, Heller had limited experience with the Bible before embarking on this project he quickly gained virtuosic competence with the text. In *God Knows*, “the Biblical original is worked through closely, with impressive stamina and elaboration” according to one reviewer.<sup>124</sup> He moves adeptly through the Bible, jumping between the Pentateuch, Kings, Samuel, Chronicles, Proverbs, Psalms, and even books like Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs in a way that leaves the reader frantically flipping through their own Bible to keep up. As far as Heller’s David is concerned he wrote nearly everything in the Bible anyway, and credit was later stolen from him, so it makes sense that he should be able to throw biblical aphorisms into his speech that come from all over the text.<sup>125</sup> The Bible is

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<sup>123</sup> Walter Clemons, “Turning Scripture into Shtik,” *Newsweek*, 19 September 1984, 80.

<sup>124</sup> Anonymous review of Joseph Heller, *God Knows*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, 15 September 1984, online at <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/joseph-heller/god-knows/> (accessed 13 March 2015).

<sup>125</sup> There is an interesting resonance between Heller’s David and Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye. Sholem Aleichem had a total mastery over biblical and liturgical literature that allowed him to coin Tevye’s constant misappropriations of the Bible. Sholem Aleichem knows the Bible, and the audience knows the Bible, which is why when Tevye gets the Bible wrong it is funny. Heller’s audience would not be as

therefore a collection of misquotations and misattributions that throw doubt on its value as a scripture. But for Heller to have gained that level of mastery over the text in such a relatively short period of time indicates a commitment to textual study of which any rabbi or yeshiva student would approve.

Heller's midrash comes from a very adult relationship to the text. When he manipulates the Bible there is a feeling that beyond the humor, beyond the social commentary, and beyond the allegory there is a desire "to get beneath the King James obfuscations and the Rabbinic encrustations in order to reveal the living, breathing, human figures underneath."<sup>126</sup> Heller, like many before him, wants to make scripture relatable to modern life. Even his "literary technique in creating a David more like a *folkmensch* than a hero is not original."<sup>127</sup> To borrow from Freud, he is taking something *unheimliche*, a David who is supposed to be pious but normal, but who is irreconcilable to our normal notion of humanity in his accomplishments and ability to speak with God and making him more *heimliche*, or humanized and comfortable. While on the surface this may seem to be taking more liberties than traditional rabbinic midrash, they both seek the same goal of making the text (or the characters therein) more comprehensible and useable. So what Heller is doing is both new and not, and although *God Knows* was, at the time, "the most sustained meditation on the Bible in contemporary Jewish fiction"

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biblically literate as Sholem Aleichem's, but they do not need to be because David is not getting the Bible wrong as much as claiming that the Bible got *him* wrong. Heller never mentions Sholem Aleichem in his memoirs, so we do not know if he was an actual influence, but the continuation of Sholem Aleichem's form makes Heller's novel all the more interesting.

<sup>126</sup> Friedman and Ruderman, "Joseph Heller and the 'Real' King David," 297.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

Heller would probably be the first to say that his intent was not to do something new or revolutionary.<sup>128</sup>

If Allen humanizes biblical characters by showing them to have the same “idiosyncrasies, sex drives, and neuroses we have,” Heller does the same and more. His David is certainly idiosyncratic and driven by libido, and while he may not be neurotic many of those around him, such as Michal and even Bathsheba, certainly are. Heller goes deeper, however, “showing the similarity of human concerns, aspirations, and foibles over time and across space. Heller actually creates Midrashim of a high/low order—the simultaneity of high and low being essential for the novel’s thematic points as well as its comic effect.”<sup>129</sup> Though the novel comes across as ribald and earthy, it also involves a deep investigation of human relationality. Heller is “trying to help us rediscover the Bible by removing the layers of whitewash that have been applied over the centuries by religious commentators and theologians” and in doing so wants to give it more meaning, not less.<sup>130</sup> He does not make the Bible ridiculous or, at least, does not make it any more ridiculous than life already is.

The novel jumps back and forth between David’s present and his past. He is old and dying, and is struggling with choosing a successor from his various sons. Bathsheba, his great love, wants her son Solomon to inherit, even though he is not the oldest. David has more or less decided to do that, even though he finds Solomon a slow-witted bore, because he loves Bathsheba and wants to please her. His advisors and priests, however, have already effectively crowned his elder son Adijonah. So the novel vacillates between

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 297-298.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

David's present dilemma and his geriatric musings about his past glory, and it is given structure by three primary themes that drive much of the action: David facing his old age and imminent death, the relationships between fathers and sons, and the way lovers lose their way over time. As previously mentioned this novel was written later in Heller's life, and though David is a bit older than Heller was at the time, they are both men in their declining years. It is not a great stretch, then, to see in David's concern over his life and legacy as being at least familiar to Heller. Early in the novel David describes his position as follows:

My children are waiting for me to die. Who can blame them? I've led a full, long life, haven't I? You can look it up. Samuel I and II. Kings. Chronicles also, but that's a prissy whitewash in which the juiciest parts of my life are discarded as unimportant or unworthy. Therefore, I hate Chronicles. In Chronicles I am a pious bore, as dull as dishwater and as preachy and insipid as that self-righteous Joan of Arc, and God knows I was never anything like that. God knows I fucked and fought plenty and had a rousing good time doing both until the time I fell in love and the baby died. Everything took a turn for the worse after that.<sup>131</sup>

David is, in a way, what Allen wants to be. He is a man who consciously and decisively turned his back on God. Only as he is dying does he really take the time to regret that decision, and wish he could repair a relationship that is obviously irreparable.

David has no lack of ego or self-confidence, and yet he is also clearly scared of the way history will remember him and defensive over the potential loss of control in shaping his own image. Heller sees the story and character of David as valuable, and therefore the book that contains the story is also valuable and useful. What *is not* useful in Heller's presentation is a reliance on God or thoughtless piety, because God is now forced into silence.

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<sup>131</sup> Heller, *God Knows*, 4-5.

David wants to make very clear what has caused the relationship between God and him to fracture. “It was,” he says “I who stopped talking to God, not He to me. It was I who broke up that friendship.”<sup>132</sup> David and God are depicted as having a fairly close relationship throughout David’s early years. David would ask God for advice, and God would respond in a mixture of biblical prose and vaudeville patter:

“Will Saul come down to Keilah after me as Thy servant believes?”

“You bet your ass,” said the Lord

“And will the men of Keilah deliver us into the hand of Saul?”

“Funny you should ask.”

“They will?”

“They will deliver thee up.”

“Then we’d better get away, right?”

“You don’t have to go to college,” said the Lord, “to figure that one out for yourself.”<sup>133</sup>

The two talked, as friends might, until God punished David for his indiscretions with Bathsheba by killing their baby. That, to David, was unforgiveable. Despite admitting “I want my God back” in the very last moments of the book David values the relationship between a parent and a child over almost everything else, and God’s destruction of that relationship was a blow David could not forgive. As David faces his own death he wants to know God again; as Heller wrote towards the end of his life he engaged with religion seriously for the first time. But wanting to know God and succeeding in knowing God are two different things, and that is a vital point in understanding the way Heller is making Judaism into a Thing. His Thing-making is a bit different than Allen’s because it seems more regretful, but it is nevertheless an admission that there is no place for two-way chats with God in modern life.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 188.



Again and again Heller shows that biblical themes are very relevant, which makes the Bible still very relevant. The Bible itself is not what is being made into a Thing, it is the cult of the Bible with which Heller has an issue. For example, the focus on fathers and sons in *God Knows* has less of an allegorical tone to it and seems to be motivated more from the way Heller is reading the biblical text. The complicated situations between David and his children—not just Absalom and Solomon, but Adonijah, Ammon, and Tamar as well—are an apparent theme in David’s story in the Bible. But Heller reads much more into the relationship between David and Saul than is on the surface of the text. For Heller, Saul is not just David’s father-in-law; he is a father-surrogate long before David and Michal marry. David craves Saul’s attention and wants nothing more than to please the mercurial king.

Heller expresses this most clearly when David opines, “Had Saul been just a bit more fatherly, I would have worshipped him as a god. Had God even been the least bit paternal, I might have loved Him like a father.”<sup>134</sup> Despite all Saul’s shortcomings, and despite Saul making it increasingly clear that he intended David harm, David nonetheless held out hope that Saul would accept and love him like a son. David says that he was “much less stiff-necked with Saul than I have been with God. I knew he was crazy; yet I wanted to win his devotion and forgiveness.”<sup>135</sup> It was, of course, never to be. David could never please Saul, no matter how hard he tried, and they would never have the relationship David wished for. Despite the fact that David claimed he “went out whithersoever Saul sent me and behaved myself wisely in all my ways, endeavoring to

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

gladden him by doing so” he and Saul would be irrevocably torn apart.<sup>136</sup> Is it any wonder, then, that David’s relationships with his own sons were so fractious?

David loved his children. He makes no bones about having loved some more than others, but he acknowledges caring about each of them. As he expresses it,

Destroying your own son for some slight and pardonable infraction—as Saul wished to do to Jonathan—might appear an intoxicating treat to some fathers. Not to this one. I could hardly ever bring myself even to scold any of mine. I think I spoiled them all by sparing the rod—most of them did vile or foolish things, even my favorites. Especially my favorites. And when Absalom was dead, I cried as though my heart must surely break. ..That was one flaw in my makeup—I felt for my children, at least my sons.<sup>137</sup>

Heller sets both God and Saul up as bad fathers (at least in David’s eyes) so that the difficulty David has with his own sons can evoke that much more pathos. It goes beyond the tear-jerking familial relationships of a Russian novel; by adding the scriptural element Heller is actually able to tap into an almost primal expression of the father/son dynamic. This is yet another example of the way in which scripture itself can remain vital in Heller’s satire while pious interpretations of scripture atrophy and become Things.

If Heller’s genius lies in filtering his contemporary surroundings through the medium of fiction, he is perhaps most successful in his use of the relationship between David and Bathsheba. In 1983, as *God Knows* was being written, Heller began the process of divorcing his wife of 35 years. It is through this storyline that Heller is able to speak most loudly; eloquently expressing the modern sadness of a man watching the end of his great love affair while simultaneously filling in the lacunae in one of the Bible’s most compelling stories. David and Bathsheba’s love has been a common subject for songwriters, artists, sculptors, and playwrights. In a long passage, Heller allows David to

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 17.

give voice to what many men and women have experienced as their affairs have aged and altered. This passage gives a good example of Heller's "warts and all" approach to the Bible. Bathsheba is no longer a timeless beauty, she is a real woman who aged as real women do. The Bible is a Thing for Heller as long as it is being piously revered, it has life only when the characters are allowed to be pathetic:

Bathsheba, changing normally with time, is heavier now and shaped with less definition in face and body than when younger. She still proudly has all her front teeth, which are small, crooked, and crowded upon each other, and chipped slightly at some of the corners... It would not matter to me if she lacked some front teeth, for I am in love with Bathsheba and desire her love more than wine, as much as ever before. Bathsheba could still warm me, bring heat to my veins with a healing rush of blood. Bathsheba could excite me most easily if she wished to, but she doesn't believe so and doesn't want to. She may not want to because she doesn't know she can.<sup>138</sup>

Why did Heller write about David? To hear him tell it he did not have a choice, since David popped into his head and informed him he has the best story in the Bible. How does the figure of David figure in to the satiric message Heller is presenting? In proving the Bible the way we have understood it to be "false," David shows us that the Bible's enduring value lies not in the idea of the text, but in the actual written characters and stories. The Bible is truly literature to David, because he lived it and he is telling us the version we got is terribly flawed. And why did Heller place David at the end of his life? Because Heller, also, was well on in years when he wrote this novel and frequently positioned his protagonists at or around the same stage in life in which Heller found himself. These questions are fairly self-evident. The bigger question is why Heller chose to address any of these issues through the use of traditional religious figures, settings, and texts. The quotation above; "the novel is a modern allegory about what it's like for a Jew

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 44.

trying to survive in a hostile world,” is perhaps the most incisive view. What it means to be a Jew surviving in a hostile world is, above all else, to lose your relationship with God and to know that scripture is a fraud. That is harsh indeed, but that is nevertheless what comes through. Though Heller is one of the greatest satirists of American life in general, there is also that side of him which is drawn to the telling of specifically Jewish stories. And while his first real foray into that arena, *Good As Gold*, was only nominally Jewish, in *God Knows* Heller shows that he can think through midrash as well as any rabbinic sage, and that he struggles with God and religious life in very real and practical ways.

### **Sister Hills**

Nathan Englander is still a fairly young writer, so his biography does not fill as much space as Allen’s or Heller’s. He was born in 1970 on Long Island to an Orthodox family. He grew up with the same New York cultural Jewish experience Allen and Heller had, but with the addition of a deeply religious family and community that stuck better to Englander than it did to Allen. He went to parochial school growing up and stayed in New York for college, graduating from SUNY-Binghamton. And while he may not have remained as Orthodox as he was raised, his connection to Judaism has remained very strong. He is both a good example of a contemporary satirist, and an outlier. His willingness to engage difficult topics with frankness and candor makes him in some ways a modern day Philip Roth. Of all the contemporary satirists in this dissertation he is the most willing to dig deeply into traditional Judaism. But that is also what makes him an outlier, because while most of the contemporary satirists in this dissertation had very assimilated upbringings, Englander was raised religious. He moved to Israel in the 1990s

and lived there for about five years. That time in Israel has influenced much of his writing, but especially the story I will be using in this analysis.

His work is almost entirely about Jews and Jewish themes, and is very often set within Orthodox communities. He is primarily known for short stories, and his first collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* won him immediate acclaim and attention. His second work was a novel, *The Ministry of Special Cases*, and his third work was another short story collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, from which “Sister Hills” is drawn. Just the fact of his constant and unambiguous use of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in all his works speaks to the generational difference between his writing and Allen and Heller’s. Allen included inside jokes for Jews, but despite one being about Hassids, neither of his stories were about realistic Jews. And Heller may have been dealing with a real Jewish hero in David, but everything was oversized, overblown, and allegorical. Neither of them was presenting an image of Jews or Judaism that was drawn from ordinary life, because both were presenting a Judaism-Thing (or at least Jewish text-Things) as part of their social commentary. Englander’s Jews and Judaism are real and living and very much vital. Conflicted and troubled, but by no means obsolete or useless, Englander’s Judaism may still be an object, but it is not a Thing.

So what does Englander’s story tell us about how satiric parody of Jewish scriptural texts changed in recent years? How do we identify the generational difference between the way Allen and Heller use biblical parody and the way a contemporary author does? As we will see throughout the chapters of this dissertation, there have been many shifts—some minor, some fairly major—in the way contemporary satirists tackle religion

as compared to their post-war counterparts. They seem, on the whole, much more interested in directing their barbs at the social flaws of the Jewish community and less interested in making “organized religion” a topic of ridicule. Allen in particular seemed to save his harshest criticism for the trappings of religion, but in the aftermath of World War II there seemed to be a certain reticence when it came to making actual Jews seem ridiculous. A significant exception to this comes in chapter four, where I discuss satire and Jewish identity. Authors like Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud did turn a very critical eye on the Jewish people, in part for seemingly turning their back on other Jewish people; for buying into the American Dream at the expense of their European coreligionists. In the twenty-first century, however, that knee-jerk fear of painting “The Jews” in a bad light has faded, and there is much more specific criticism aimed at both individual people and the Jewish community as a whole.

The relationship to parody has also changed. Formal parody has declined as a serious art form in recent years. Today it is thought of as the domain of humor magazines and comic performers such as Weird Al, so formal parody is rarely used by twenty-first century authors. The most popular forms of parody today parody a genre rather than a specific work, which is what we find in shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Looking, therefore, for a contemporary example of the same style Allen and Heller utilized yields practically no results. Formal parody has become a bastion of broad comedy, and is considered ill-suited to biting satire today. The same goes for pastiche or homage; they are harder to locate, at least within literature. Hutcheon tries to differentiate pastiche from parody and ultimately finds it difficult. As she reports, though, the commonly cited differences between them are that pastiche is “more serious and

respectful than parody,” and that “parody is transformational...pastiche is imitative.”<sup>139</sup>

We are left, therefore, potentially without a term for this model of intertextual referencing that is not formal enough to be parody, and not serious enough to be pastiche, and not respectful enough to be homage. Allusion comes closest, but can an entire work be one, long, allusion? Regardless of what we call it, this text-linking practice can be used to describe works such as The Coen Brothers’ *A Serious Man* (which will be discussed in chapter 3) as well as Englander’s short story “Sister Hills,” with which we will conclude this chapter on text.

In “Sister Hills” Englander uses the biblical story of Solomon and the two mothers as the emotional frame for his story.<sup>140</sup> If this can even be considered a parody, it is most assuredly not the same sort of parody being employed by Allen and Heller. Reviews of the story makes it clear that the Solomonic undertones are not even noticed by all readers. While one calls it a “reimagining” of “the old Bible story of the child claimed by two rival mothers”<sup>141</sup> another sees in it not Solomon but “biblical overtones of lost birth rights and rash vows and terrible covenants.”<sup>142</sup> A third sees in the story Englander wrestling not with scripture, but with “the complexly obligatory strictures of Jewish culture,”<sup>143</sup> and yet a fourth sees the story as “a parable, with echoes of Tolstoy’s

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<sup>139</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> 1 Kings 3:16-28.

<sup>141</sup> James Lasdun, “Review: Short Stories,” *The Guardian*, 4 February 2012, 10.

<sup>142</sup> Philip Marchand, “Perplexed for a guide: Nathan Englander’s new short story collection of Jews looking for meaning in their narratives,” *National Post*, 25 February 2012, WP.15.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Macfarlane, “Love and the Art of Being Anxious: Nathan Englander’s Short Stories about Jewishness Are Intricately Crafted Gems,” *Sunday Times*, 22 January 2012, 41.

late fables.”<sup>144</sup> The variety of interpretations do not surprise Englander, who said that “‘Sister Hills,’ more than anything else he has ever written, functions as a ‘Rorschach test’ for many of his readers.”<sup>145</sup> So while the majority of readers may pick up on the resemblances to Solomon’s story, the reference is oblique enough to give different readers a sense that the story is building on a different basis.

The actual story is fairly simple: it chronicles the life of a Jewish settlement in the West Bank from 1973, when the settlement is just two families, to 2011 when it is a thriving metropolis. One night in 1973 Yehudit’s baby daughter becomes very ill, and as a last ditch effort to save the girl she falls back on an old, rarely-used custom where, by selling her daughter to someone else, she can hide her from the Angel of Death and keep the girl alive. So in the middle of a stormy night she sells her daughter to the matriarch of the other settler family, Rena. Yehudit says she will take the “burden” of raising the child “as if I were her mother—though I am not,” and Rena agrees to loan her new daughter back to Yehudit until she is grown.<sup>146</sup> As time moves forward Rena’s husband and all of her sons are killed; most in the fighting over the West Bank, though one son in a car accident. Yehudit’s family, on the other hand, thrives. So when Rena shows up on Yehudit’s doorstep 27 years later to claim Aheret, no one can quite believe she is trying to make Yehudit’s desperate bargain stick. Least of all Aheret, who had never been told the story of her sale.

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<sup>144</sup> Dan Friedman, “What is Englander Saying? ‘Anne Frank’ Overcomes Most of Hurdles in Way,” *Forward*, 17 February 2012, 12-13, online at <<http://forward.com/articles/151036/what-is-nathan-englander-saying/>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

<sup>145</sup> Eric Berger, “Nathan Englander Reflects on the Stories Chosen for ‘One Book One Jewish Community,’” *Jewish Exponent*, 25 October 2012, 4-5.

<sup>146</sup> Nathan Englander, “Sister Hills,” in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* (New York: Vintage International, 2012), 47.



Yehudit forces the issue to a religious court (*beit din*) to try to get the contract declared invalid, but Rena is ultimately successful. If this is meant to be an allegory for the Jewish settlements of the Occupied Territories, it is an extremely opaque one. Englander says that, “‘Right-wing people come up to me and say, ‘You see, this is why we need the settlements. This is why they’re important,’ And then left-wing people say, ‘This is why the settlements are amoral. This is why they’re corrupting the soul of Israel.’”<sup>147</sup> With whose stance are you meant to side? It is Rena, who argues so eloquently that if any contracts in Judaism are valid then they all are, and that includes both the three thousand year old contract with God for that land, and the twenty-seven year old contract over Aheret. Or is it Yehudit, who argues for relationships over technicality and love over legalism? Perhaps surprisingly (or perhaps not), the *beit din* sides with Rena. Rena loses everything over the ideal of the settlements and eventually forces a young woman to live with and take care of her through her old age and into her death. But if Englander means for that to impart a moral conclusion about the settlements it is anyone’s guess as to what that conclusion is. Englander’s story stretches satire to its limits, showing the reasons why satire and humor are not always one and the same, even though the majority of time they are. “Sister Hills” is deathly serious, especially for the families involved. Englander’s critique, however, is just as satiric and Allen’s or Heller’s despite not being what would generally be thought of as “funny.”

His moral vagueness, however, speaks to the larger issue of how his use of Judaism and Jewish themes sets him apart as different from third generation satirists like

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<sup>147</sup> Berger, “Nathan Englander Reflects on the Stories Chosen for ‘One Book One Jewish Community,’” 4-5.

Allen and Heller. Traditionally the assumption would be that the ethical message of a midrash would be fairly apparent; it does not do a very good job of acting as scriptural spackle if it is too inscrutable or the meaning is too obscure. But Englander's story appears to support one's views no matter which side of the settlement issue one is on, which makes it different from his predecessors. Englander is satirizing, through the seemingly illogical outcome of the story, the having of sides more than he is satirizing one side or the other, because to his sensibility the connection between Judaism and land has significant flaws. This functions as satire because it is aimed at society's complacencies. Returning for a moment to Linda Hutcheon's definition of satire, it consists of, "critical distancing and...value judgments, satire generally uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized—to distort, to belittle, to wound."<sup>148</sup> That which is satirized in this case, however, is not the Bible itself (where we first see the covenant for land explained) or not Judaism itself; the problem is people and the way people have used and possibly twisted the traditions and texts to suit their own purposes. Because Englander stays rather coy about whether or not he supports one side of the settlement issue or the other the story opens itself up to myriad understandings, but on either side there is a belief that the relationship between Jews and the land has gone awry.<sup>149</sup>

Is the worshipping of land a problem? Maybe, maybe not. Tony Kushner and Englander had that very conversation in 2011 and Kushner argued that, "You don't worship a graven image - including a graven image on a map. The heart of Judaism is

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<sup>148</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 43-44.

<sup>149</sup> Though he writes occasionally for *Ha'aretz*, so it is a safe bet he at least leans liberal and left of center on such things.

being supplanted by a map.”<sup>150</sup> In response to that, Englander asked the question: “if a map isn't what we're supposed to hold in that metaphysical space that is the ideological heart, what is it that should go there?”<sup>151</sup> One possibility Englander presents, even unwittingly, in “Sister Hills” is that there is not much room for a map in that metaphysical space because it is already occupied by the fetishized, Thing-images of scripture. Englander’s use of the story from scripture in such a slight way shows that he likely does not care if every reader “gets it” (and as we see from the reviews they did not). But those who do get it have seen this story, like so many from *God Knows*, translated into shorthand because the *presence* of the story matters more than the *content* of the story. The use of the text, slight though it is, is enough. It does not have to have a clear moral message because the text has been invoked and that is sufficient. And Englander’s much more subtle reliance on specific textual forms and clues shows the way that the text, once it has been made into a Thing, has been internalized and normalized over the course of a generation or two from Allen and Heller to now, and is being reinvigorated and given new life and new purpose.

### Conclusion

The fiction of Allen, Heller, and Englander supports a reinterpretation of Jewish satire as interacting with the religious texts, rituals, and practices of Judaism. There is ample evidence to suggest that it would not be the same, or perhaps could not exist at all,

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<sup>150</sup> Nathan Englander, “Angels Perceived as Devils,” *Ha’aretz*, 15 June 2011, online at <<http://www.haaretz.com/life/culture/angels-perceived-as-devils-1.367780>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

without the influence of the religious system behind it. Both Allen and Heller used their knowledge of the vast textual traditions undergirding Judaism to produce satires that have broad appeal, but that require a deep education in, or at least understanding of, Jewish scripture and literature to fully appreciate. They each produce midrash for the modern world; trying to read contemporary situations and problems through ancient and antique texts. But at the same time they show scripture to be a false and desiccated Thing. Allen does this through his “new” scriptures that show the ridiculousness of both the scriptures themselves, and those who spend their lives studying those texts. Heller tears down scripture by showing it to be a pale imitation of reality. David tells us that his real life was nothing like what got preserved in the text, and that so many of the books attributed to others were actually written by him. In that case, not only can there be no divine basis for the Torah, but what value does it have at all if it is unreliable and plagiarized? God is present but disgusted by blind faith in Allen’s story, and abandoned in a fit of rage in Heller’s, but both show that a life without God is the lot of the modern person.

Englander’s story works with different assumptions. Though God is still absent in “Sister Hills,” (unless you read Yehudit and Rena’s bargain as being successful, which you could) the use of scripture is both much less obvious, and much more meaningful. Solomon’s verdict is invoked because the story has good, real, meaningful merit. What is being satirized seems to shift depending on which side of the settlement issue you are on, but in either case it is not the Bible. The satire is of Jews and their relationship to the land is different for each reader; either the settlements are folly and only result in death, or the only way for the Jewish people to survive is to realize that covenants are viable and

enforceable and must be defended at all cost. The Jewish people are not a victim of a scripture that is forcing itself on them. They make their own problems.

Although most if not all of Allen's fiction and films touch on religion here or there, Judaism is usually treated like a punch line, and leaves itself open to precisely the critique Allen Guttman, Mel Brooks, and others expressed about the validity of calling this humor "Jewish." Comedians of Allen and Heller's generation moved towards making Judaism into a Thing that was immediately recognizable and a part of their characters' every word and deed, but was nevertheless inert and mostly useless. Allen satirized the loss of Jewish identity by heightening the Jewishness and insider humor of his texts and characters. Heller was proving that assimilation was not a *fait accompli*, and that it was possible for a child of the socialist 1930s to write midrashic novels. But both were saying that the modern Jew can exist without God or Torah. Englander takes this Judaism-Thing and breathes new life into it, saying instead that scripture is precisely what we need when trying to find answers to ultimately unanswerable moral dilemmas.

While Heller engaged—perhaps for the first time—with scriptures, Allen simultaneously employed his understanding of traditional ideas and themes and paired them with his rejection of organized religion and theistic belief. Allen's atheism (or agnosticism, he says he vacillates between the two) does not come from a negative response to God, but a negative response to religion. And it certainly does not come from ignorance of religion.<sup>152</sup> He says of his upbringing "I was raised fairly religiously...and never took to it very much."<sup>153</sup> And yet, he returns to religious themes again and again, sometimes in a derisive way (*God*) and sometimes in a very thoughtful way (*Crimes and*

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<sup>152</sup> Dart, "Woody Allen, Theologian," 585.

<sup>153</sup> Dart, "Woody Allen, Theologian," 586.

*Misdemeanors*).<sup>154</sup> Allen may have escaped believing in God, but he cannot, it seems, escape thinking about God.

Heller, for his part, did not begin with the same childhood upbringing in traditional Judaism that Allen had. But when he decided to bring Judaism into his writing he studied the texts until he could manipulate it in a way that made David sound convincingly like the author of almost the entire Bible. In using religion in his fiction, Heller has “isolated discontinuity, the lack of connection and therefore meaning and morality, as distinguishing the experience of men in our time.”<sup>155</sup> Religion, or religious dissatisfaction, helps Heller increase the depth of an otherwise superficial story. The allegorical levels of the story become much more complex and interdependent through the manipulation of biblical material. William Pritchard described Heller as having a “scrappy, devil-may-care way with what those Jews used to take seriously,” and the separation of Heller from “those Jews” shows how complicated Heller’s relationship to Judaism was, even from an outsider’s perspective.<sup>156</sup>

But acknowledging that Heller is using scripture for his own ends is not the same as saying he does not take it seriously. Any writer will tell you that even when they lampoon something (which is not what Heller is doing), they still take the source material seriously. Heller made a conscious decision to immerse himself in the Bible and to come to know it well enough to weave a story out of the ellipses left by the original authors,

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<sup>154</sup> *Cassandra’s Dream* (2007) was his most recent film to deal with faith and morality, so while his late-career renaissance has not produced as many films about Jews or Judaism as his early career did he is still wrestling with how to live a moral life in a Godless world.

<sup>155</sup> John W. Hunt, “Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: The Novels of Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon,” in *Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Essays in Divinity, no. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 90.

<sup>156</sup> William H. Pritchard, “Fictive Voices,” *The Hudson Review* 38, no. 1 (1985): 121.

and no one would do that with a source text they thought was worthless. It could even be argued that, as Sanford Pinsker deemed it, this book “is an example of Yiddish humor at its most authentic...[because] it signifies a quarrel with God rather than the endless kvetching about one’s mother that is the standard fare of Jewish-American stand-ups.”<sup>157</sup> Whether you view it as a positive thing or a negative thing, scripture *is* serious. Many people build their lives around it, or risk their daughter’s life on the hope that it works. Just because it is being made into a Thing and demystified by Allen and Heller does not make it any less one of the three legs on which Judaism stands, it just shows that they want people to recognize this leg is just a leg, just a method of propping something up and not anything special on its own, and stop giving it undue influence over their lives.

Allen and Heller join a long tradition of artists, from painters to novelists to composers who have been credited with creating modern midrash. Twentieth century satirists are able to use scripture or midrash in their comedy in part because the previous generation blew the stigma off of appearing “too Jewish.” In the end, any argument that Jewish humor is not traditionally *Jewish* falls flat when you realize how much of the work of even a staunch anti-religion campaigner like Allen or dyed-in-the-wool socialist like Heller was actually satirizing Judaism in defense of Jews. The question should not be about how Jewish or not the authors or their work is. The question should be how they present Judaism to the world. Allen and Heller present it as a Thing that may be holding Jews back, while Englander turns it around and, perhaps, shows it to be the only thing that will save your soul on a dark, stormy night.

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<sup>157</sup> Pinsker, “How ‘Jewish’ is Joseph Heller?” 50.

### CHAPTER 3: GOD (IS IN THE DETAILS)

R. Eleazar said: When the Israelites gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hearken,' a Heavenly Voice went forth and exclaimed to them, Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the Ministering Angels, as it is written, Bless the Lord, ye angels of his. Ye mighty in strength, that fulfil his word, that hearken unto the voice of his word: first they fulfil and then they hearken?

- Talmud Shabbat 88a

Two Rabbis were discussing their problems with squirrels in their synagogue attic. One Rabbi said, "We simply called an exterminator and we never saw the squirrels again." The other Rabbi said, "We just gave them all a bar mitzvah, and we never saw the squirrels again."

- Anonymous joke<sup>1</sup>

#### Ritual Theory

Judaism has long been described as a religion of action; a religion which, according to Menachem Kellner, "expresses itself in terms of behavior, rather than in terms of systematic theology."<sup>2</sup> Moses Mendelssohn argued in *Jerusalem* that ritual performers, such as *mohels* for example, who are the functionaries trained to perform

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<sup>1</sup> The joke is also sometime a multifaith joke. Here, for example, is the way it was published in the Rockland, New Jersey *Jewish Standard* in 2009: "A small town had a synagogue and two churches, Presbyterian and Methodist. All three had a serious problem with squirrels in their buildings. So, each group had a meeting to deal with the problem. The Presbyterians decided that it was predestined that squirrels be in the church, and that they would just have to live with them. The Methodists decided they should deal with the squirrels lovingly. They trapped them humanely and released them in a park at the edge of town. (Within three days, all the squirrels had returned to the church.) The Jews simply voted the squirrels in as members and gave them all a bar mitzvah. Now they see them only at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur." (Warren Boroson. "Boroson's Anecdote." <http://jstandard.com/index.php/content/item/11188/>)

<sup>2</sup> Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (Portland, OR: Valentine, Mitchell & Co., 1999), 43.



ritual circumcisions, could still fulfill their ritual obligations even if they had lost their faith in God.<sup>3</sup> Arnold Eisen pointed out in *Rethinking Modern Judaism* that understanding the relationship between belief and action in Judaism is further complicated by the fact that, “modern Jewish thinkers, like their predecessors, have generally been loathe to speak systematically about the God who is addressed in prayer or invoked in ritual practices.”<sup>4</sup> Debating the merits of this view of Judaism is not important in order to acknowledge that the role of practice in Judaism is privileged.<sup>5</sup> Consider how one describes members of a religious community. Jews are called “observant” while Catholics, for example, are “devout.” Although there is quite a bit that goes into “practice,” ritual actions and behaviors are the most easily identifiable aspect of religious practice. In this chapter I am going to argue that third generation satirists make Judaism into a Thing, while contemporary satirists revivify it.

If Judaism is focused on action, and action is often reduced to ritual, it stands to reason that a large body of Jewish satire is devoted to ritual activities. Ritual is nearly as readily made into a Thing as text because ritual performance has a natural relationship to ritual objects, and the two can easily become conflated, turning ritual itself into the object of use, and then eventually the Thing of disuse. This chapter will examine the role of ritual in Judaism and its Thing-like character in Jewish ritual. Ritual events that lend themselves particularly to satire include circumcision, bar mitzvah, and funeral practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: or, On Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 82.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Jacobs called this view “the caricature of Judaism as a religion with its stress above all on the physical body in its relationship to the divine” in false dichotomy to Christianity, which is focused on the soul. Both understandings are really straw men, according to Jacobs, and we need to move away from this binary understanding of Judaism as pro-body (“carnal Israel”) and Protestant Christianity in particular as anti-body (Louis Jacobs, “The Body in Jewish Worship: Three Rituals Examined,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 71).

The study of ritual as a discrete theoretical framework separate from anthropology as a whole goes back only fifty years or so, which means that there is still quite a bit left undefined and unexplained. Importantly there is not an agreed-upon definition of what ritual itself even is. Ronald Grimes, one of the major figures in ritual theory for example, says “ritual does not ‘exist’... ritual is an idea scholars formulate,”<sup>6</sup> while Catherine Bell says that “ritual, like action, will act out, express, or perform...conceptual orientations.”<sup>7</sup> Jan Snoek said it perhaps most clearly when he wrote that “the number of definitions proposed is endless, and no one seems to like the definitions proposed by anyone else.”<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this chapter ritual means the formalized activities around life cycle events. Because while ritual as a concept may not exist or be easily definable, *rituals* must exist. And while it may seem obvious that certain things are rituals while others are not, the very indefinability of ritual means that it is, in fact, an open question.

Ritual has long been seen as an essential meaning-making behavior. Émile Durkheim saw the enactment of ritual as a way for “primitive” societies to interact with the symbolic world and with “sacred things”.<sup>9</sup> The “sacred,” for Durkheim, was anything that was set apart and united us into a community. Because sacred things are sacred, they would actually be objects in the Brownian sense. The sacred nature of a ritual, following Durkheim’s definition, comes not from the ritual itself but from the way it is treated by

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies on Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Snoek, “Defining Rituals,” in Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, Michael Stausberg, eds., *Theorizing Rituals*, vol. 1, *Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 3.

<sup>9</sup> “Finally, rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things,” *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 40.

the group who performs it and how it brings that group together. Even more than as a method for communicating with the divine, rituals are the building blocks of a community and work as social glue. Frida Furman sees Durkheim's work, in conjunction with social theorists who came after him such as Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, as "arguing that ritual not only reflects the social order but can also serve as a powerful instrument in creating cultural values and thus in revitalizing, or even transforming, social structure itself."<sup>10</sup> This social-functional definition of ritual means that it remains relevant, even vital, regardless of whether an understanding of, or relationship to, the divine changes over time. Hence the fact that life cycle rituals are not only still in practice, but are constantly being redesigned and seriously examined even in the more liberal branches of Judaism.

The topic of ritual takes on special significance in this analysis as well because it is such a constantly negotiated landscape. There are private actions that can be construed as "ritualistic." But following the Durkheimian model an act is not truly a ritual unless it unites a community. When ritual is made into a Thing it actually undermines its very existence. If scripture becomes a Thing it may no longer be scripture, but it is still a text; it can still be read, which is one primary function although it may have lost its other function of imparting religious meaning. A ritual that no longer unites people, however, is no longer a ritual at all. It is only a series of behaviors lacking any function. That is why the stakes throughout this chapter are especially high. A ritual-Thing is really nothing. It lacks the material and aesthetic value of a text so if it does nothing, it is nothing.

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<sup>10</sup> Frida Kerner Furman, "Ritual as Social Mirror and Agent of Cultural Change: A Case Study in Synagogue Life," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 3 (1981): 228.

One way of trying to arrest this reduction to Thing-that-is-nothing of rituals is to reimagine the rituals, and expand both the meanings attached to a ritual and the parts of the community for whom a particular ritual is intended. Jewish feminists such as Vanessa Ochs and Sharon Siegel have written extensively about the rise of woman-centered rituals in modern Judaism as evidence that the contemporary human need for ritual transcends the original understanding of ritual.<sup>11</sup> This is why the second epigraph for this chapter is funny; “it’s funny because it’s true,” as they say.<sup>12</sup> The joke is lampooning the fact that for many American Jews it is *only* around important life cycle events that they participate in Jewish congregational life. Circumcision, bar/bat mitzvah, and funerals represent three of the four major life moments (marriage being the fourth) and those rituals hold social or psychological meaning for people even in families where the rituals lost any theological meaning generations ago.

This chapter is going to look at a range of satiric treatments of Jewish rituals and those functionaries who perform them, mainly rabbis, in order to highlight another way that Judaism has been treated differently by different generations of American Jews. Notably, there are very scant examples of ritual in the general canon of the third generation satirists. That absence speaks volumes. In order to classify Judaism as a Thing (as opposed to an object) it is necessary, Bill Brown told us, to see it as no longer having use or not working anymore. If that is to be the case, ritual would need to be the first aspect of Judaism abandoned as it is the most “functional” side, at least on the surface. So if ritual is the *most* archaic, the *most* outdated aspect of Judaism then it is barely worth

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<sup>11</sup> See Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007); Sharon Siegel, “Jewish Welcoming Ceremonies for Newborn Girls: The Modern Development of a Feminist Ritual,” *Modern Judaism* 32, no. 3 (2012): 335-358.

<sup>12</sup> Also because there are animals doing human stuff, as discussed in chapter 1.

mentioning. What we will see in this chapter is limited, liminal engagement with ritual in the twentieth century and then richer, more dynamic involvement with ritual in the twenty-first century.

The generational designations become muddy in this chapter because the third generation simply did not use rituals significantly in their satires. So in this chapter alone we must involve what is really the Baby Boom generation. Baby Boomers, whom I am identifying as those who were born anywhere from the end World War II up through the 1960s, sit in a liminal place as far as identity is concerned.<sup>13</sup> They exhibit elements that define both the third generation and the contemporary generation. They are only a generation removed from the war, so the memory (or postmemory to borrow from Marianne Hirsch) of the Holocaust is still a clear part of their notion of Jewishness.<sup>14</sup> Their childhoods also included the turbulent (and largely anti-establishment) 1960s and Vietnam War, so they frequently exhibit attitudes that are dismissive of organized religion in the same way the third generation was. This is what we will see in satires of circumcision, through an early sketch from *Saturday Night Live* and a *Seinfeld* episode. Those members of the Baby Boom generation in particular who were born in the areas of third settlement (the suburbs or other areas of low Jewish concentration) alternatively lean more in the direction of the contemporary generation. In their satires we find a

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<sup>13</sup> The term Baby Boom was first used in relation to the children being born after World War II by Sylvia Porter in an article called “Babies Equal Boom” in the May 4, 1951 edition of the *New York Post*. There is not an agreed upon definition of a Baby Boom among sociologists, with some using actual numbers of births to determine a Boom (generally two births per one hundred women per year) while others look for a percent increase in the birth rate, such as a 25% jump, regardless of how many births per one hundred women that represents. Also, there have been several Baby Booms in the United States following either method, including after both World Wars, but when people refer to simply “The Baby Boom” it is generally this one that begins after World War II and continues into the 1950s or 1960s depending on what formula you use to determine a Boom.

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch has written extensively on her coined term “postmemory,” but she originated it in the 1990s as a way of discussing Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. See: Hirsch, Marianne, “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile,” *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (1996): 659-686.

greater care taken in the depiction of Jewish ritual, which is what we will see in the Coen Brothers' take on the Bar Mitzvah. Finally, we will see a true contemporary generation example of the satiric use of ritual in Jonathan Tropper's use of shiva and Kaddish in *This is Where I Leave You*.

### **The Circumcision—Background**

There is a case to be made for circumcision being *the* ritual act that defines Judaism.<sup>15</sup> Operating under the assumption that Genesis is a book chock full of symbolic meaning, the covenant between God and Abraham stands out as a key moment. Abraham first meets God in chapter 12 of Genesis, when God tells Abraham to leave his home and everything he knows so that God can make him into “a great nation.” Although this lays the groundwork for the all-important covenant, it is not until five chapters later, Genesis 17:23 when the covenant is actually sealed. Abraham circumcises himself, his son Ishmael (who is thirteen at the time) and all of his male slaves as God had commanded. The traditional Hebrew term for the ritual is *brit milah* which translates as “covenant of circumcision,” so the covenantal nature of the ritual is explicit in the name. Every day, all over the world, eight day old Jewish boys and their families are re-entering this covenant and reenacting the biblical relationship between God, Abraham, and his (male) descendants.

It is easy to see why the circumcision remains the most defining ritual of a Jewish life. In 2007 the World Health Organization estimated that 98% of Jewish boys were circumcised (compared to 80% of American boys in general and significantly lower

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<sup>15</sup> And while true, this is an ongoing and very obvious problem for women in Judaism.

numbers elsewhere in the world).<sup>16</sup> The second most prominent life cycle ritual (which will be discussed in greater length shortly) is the *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, and while it is more difficult to estimate its prevalence, the 2013 Pew study found as many as 30% of American Jews have no synagogue affiliation, which would make observing a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* difficult.<sup>17</sup> So a generous estimate would be that 70% of boys and an even lower percentage of girls celebrate their *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, although many families keep a synagogue affiliation until their children get through *bar* or *bat mitzvah* and then leave, making any assumption based on affiliation data tenuous at best.<sup>18</sup> Both cultural caché and statistical data would seem to support the notion that the circumcision remains the most definitive ritual of a Jewish life, or it is as far as most satires are concerned, because satire deals with perceptions and assumptions. Satire, as we discussed in the previous chapter, must be anchored in the real world in order to work, but a perceived real world is often much easier to satirize than a *real* real world that involves much nuance and gray area.

It is not a coincidence that all or most of the satirists dealing with circumcision are men. First of all, as a ritual with no female equivalent it is something with which men are more concerned. But women have sons, so it is not as though they are unaware of or unaffiliated with circumcision. Freud said of sexual or obscene jokes that “a chance exposure has a comic effect on us because we compare the ease with which we enjoyed

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<sup>16</sup> World Health Organization and United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, “Male Circumcision: Global trends and determinants of prevalence, safety, and acceptability,” online at <[http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2007/9789241596169\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2007/9789241596169_eng.pdf)> (accessed March 5, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Pew Research Center, “Infographic: Survey of Jewish Americans,” online at <<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/12/03/infographic-survey-of-jewish-americans/>> (accessed March 5, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> So the true numbers could be higher because of families who have short-term affiliations, or lower since not all children, even of synagogue affiliated families, have a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*.

the sight with the great expenditure which would otherwise be required for reaching this end.”<sup>19</sup> In short, accidental genital exposure is funny and enjoyable because normally you have to work so hard to see someone’s genitals. This is a *very* gendered assumption. Few women would think that accidental exposure to a strange man’s genitals is an opportunity for laughter. Even fewer would see the accidental exposure of their own genitals as a fun time. So it stands to reason that most of the people joking about circumcision are men if Freud is correct about our (or at least, men’s) instinct to laugh at genital exposure.

It is perhaps self-evident why there are more circumcision jokes than jokes about other rituals, and more secular comedians and writers use a circumcision as a canvas for humor than other life-cycle events. Sophomoric as it may be, penises are funny. There is a combination of benign violation humor and superiority humor at play in joking about a minor violence being perpetuated against such a sensitive part of someone’s body.<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that there is not plenty of room for satirizing *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, weddings, and funerals. *Bar* and *bat mitzvah* deal with awkward adolescent angst and often burgeoning sexuality which also involve superiority responses because as adults we feel we have earned the right to laugh at teenage struggles, while both weddings and funerals generally result in the bringing together of family and the ability to laugh at a group of people who can prove themselves to be even more dysfunctional than your own family. But none of these appear as frequently in humor as circumcision jokes. Jewish weddings and funerals, while present in popular culture, most often appear in satires of Jewish life and Jewish families more broadly. It is rarer to see them in a story where the Jewishness

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<sup>19</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 275.

<sup>20</sup> Shaunacy Ferro, “FYI: Why is it funny when a guy gets hit in the groin?” online at <<http://www.popsoci.com/science/article/2013-07/fyi-why-funny-guy-hit-groin>> (accessed March 5, 2015).



of the characters was not already a main theme. *Bar* or *bat mitzvah* and circumcision on the other hand appear at times as the only mention of Jewish identity in a particular satire. In fact, the two examples of circumcision satires we will be examining are from sources which spent little to no time on Jewish themes across their long broadcast histories. Yet both had writing staffs made up predominantly of Jews, so it is natural that when they wanted to use a Jewish ritual in a satire they would choose a circumcision.

## Royal Deluxe II

*Saturday Night Live* has tried to be an equal opportunity offender, and with its diverse cast and a large writing staff it reflects a melting pot more than any one cultural milieu.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, during its early years the writing staff was more than 50% Jewish and an occasional Jewish joke or reference would get thrown in, often as an “inside joke” for the writers more than for the audience. As Marilyn Susanne Miller, a writer on the show from its inception in 1975 until she left the show in 1978 said, “*Saturday Night Live* waved the wand and said ‘Let there be Jews,’ and there were Jews, on the network, on the show, openly discussing their lives in sketches, as writers and actors.”<sup>22</sup>

In the early years of the show these references generally occupied the liminal space of the “faux-merical,” the fake commercials for which *SNL* became famous. One of

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<sup>21</sup> It is well known and well-documented that *SNL* has a spotty track record for hiring minorities as performers, especially women of color. It was national news when they hired a black, female performer recently because in all their years they had never featured one (see Bill Carter, “‘S.N.L.’ Hires Black Female Cast Member,” *New York Times*, 6 January 2014, online at <[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/07/business/media/snl-hires-black-female-cast-member.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/07/business/media/snl-hires-black-female-cast-member.html?_r=1)> [accessed 11 March 2015]). So I am not implying that *SNL* is a perfect model of racial and ethnic inclusion, but just that they do not embody one particular, identifiable religious or cultural point of view.

<sup>22</sup> Symi Rom-Rymer, “Live from New York, it’s *Saturday Night’s* Jews!” *Moment*, July-August 2010, online at <<http://www.momentmag.com/jewish-enterprise-9/>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

the first faux-mercials was Jewish-themed, and became one of the most well-known sketches from *SNL* 's first few seasons. Unlike other, more controversial faux-mercials it was not defying stereotypes but was instead living up (down?) to them.<sup>23</sup> In the first episode of the third season, airing on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1977 there was a faux-mercial for the fictional car “Royal Deluxe II.” From Ricardo Montalban’s famous 1975 Chrysler commercial with its “soft Corinthian leather” to the 1973 Pontiac Grand Am commercial featuring “scientists” beating the car with tire irons and bouncing it off of walls, the 1970s was known for car commercials that built brand loyalty on the backs of ridiculous claims and bizarre descriptions. The Royal Deluxe ad is a perfect parody of the larger body of 1970s car commercials, and as such that is the primary satiric motivation of the sketch. But there is a secondary satire taking place as well; one that both makes a Thing out of Jewish tradition and satirizes late twentieth century Jewish upward-mobility.

The sketch is only about 90 seconds long, so the specific content is not the most important feature. In brief, Dan Ackroyd narrates the ad and introduces the car: “A luxury name and a luxury ride at a middle-range price? Impossible? We’ve come to Temple Beth Shalom in Little Neck, New York, and asked Rabbi Mayer Taklas to circumcise eight-day-old Benjamin Cantor while riding in the back seat of the elegant Royal Deluxe II.” They then drive the car over an especially pothole-filled road while the Rabbi performs the circumcision. “Poifect,” he exclaims when the job is done. Dan Ackroyd closes by telling the audience, “You may never have to perform a circumcision in the

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<sup>23</sup> See the discussion of “Jewess Jeans” below, n25.

Royal Deluxe II, but if you do, we're sure you'll agree with Rabbi Taklas..." and the Rabbi responds, "That's a beautiful baby... and a beautiful car!"<sup>24</sup>

There are two primary issues for our purposes here: one has to do with the commercialization of the Rabbi, and the second, larger issue has to do with what the sketch tells us about how ritual is being thought of and used. The first issue is related the use of the Rabbi as a spokesman, and expresses a sense of "selling out." The critique of Jewish materialism will come up in greater length in the next chapter, but whereas we will see that Woody Allen meant his statement as a critique (as all of his statements on religion in some way are), the writers of SNL are more concerned with tapping into the zeitgeist in order to generate laughs. They were banking on the non-Jewish percentage of their audience—their audience, mind you, not the American population as a whole—to know enough about Jewish stereotypes to recognize the humor. They kept the language purposely broad; they say "circumcision" twice, but never "bris," they refer to Rabbi Taklas, but never call him a *mohel*. SNL draws about seven million viewers weekly, and has held steady with those numbers for about the last decade. That would put it, for comparison, just outside the top twenty five prime time shows and with the all-important demographic of males aged 18-49 they score much higher; in the top ten of all TV shows.<sup>25</sup> So their audience is young, male, and largely urban and suburban. In the 1970s when the show premiered and when this ad ran, the total viewers may have been slightly

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<sup>24</sup> This transcript is online at <<http://snltranscripts.jt.org/77/77aroyaledeluxe.shtml>> (accessed 11 March 2015). The entire commercial can be found at <<https://screen.yahoo.com/royal-deluxe-ii-000000400.html>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Meredith Blake, "'Saturday Night Live' Has Experienced Significant Loss of Talent, but Its Creator Has a Knack for Developing Stars," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 20 July 2012, online at <<http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/tv-radio/2012/07/20/Saturday-Night-Live-has-experienced-significant-loss-of-talent-but-its-creator-has-a-knack-for-developing-stars/stories/201207200124>> (accessed March 5, 2015).

lower, but their ratings share and demographic draw was the same if not higher. For that audience circumcision vs bris and rabbi vs *mohel* were the correct choices.

But they also included code words for their Jewish viewers as well; inside jokes meant to speak to their knowledge base. We are told we are visiting “Temple Beth Shalom in Little Neck, NY.” Beth Shalom is one of the most generic synagogue names you could invent, which many Jews would recognize. In fact, a quick scan of the Union for Reform Judaism’s directory shows thirty one Beth Shaloms in seventeen different states. SNL is aired to a live audience, and you can hear the laughter build halfway through that line. Up to that point there has been nothing about the commercial that was unlike any other car commercial, but when Dan Ackroyd says “Temple Beth Shalom in Little Neck...” the audience has already begun laughing because a significant portion of them now see where the joke is going. Thomas Hobbes called laughter, “a kind of sudden glory,” which D. H. Monroe explains is used “in the sense of ‘vainglory’, or self-esteem.”<sup>26</sup> The audience laughs because they recognize a reference that in and of itself may not be funny, but by laughing they show themselves to be superior, or a part of the in-crowd. It is an instinctual response and a way to make sure everyone knows you “get it.”

The sketch speaks to two audiences simultaneously, and the payoff of the joke also functions on multiple levels. The slapstick middle portion, in which the rabbi works on the baby while the car goes over potholes and even slams on the brakes to avoid a ball in the road, is meant to appeal to everyone. It is broad humor that you do not need to be Jewish to appreciate; all you have to do is know what circumcision is. The end of the joke

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<sup>26</sup> D. H. Monroe, *Argument of Laughter* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 83.

is similar to the beginning in creating an insider/outsider dynamic. The rabbi's name, "Taklas," is probably a play on the Yiddish and Hebrew word "tachlis," meaning the point, the heart of the matter. Also, the rabbi's strong Yiddish accent in his one line ("Poifect!") brings to mind an image of "Old World," traditional Judaism despite this being most likely a Reform rabbi.<sup>27</sup> It is yet another example of Dan Ben-Amos' point about Jewish dialect humor. Furthermore, his final line "That's a beautiful baby... and a beautiful car!" is the bow that wraps the entire sketch up. His loyalties are divided. His priority should be the baby, but he is equally enamored of the car.

In theory this sketch should be seen as offensive, as Gilda Radner's "Jewess Jeans" ad was a few years later.<sup>28</sup> The fact that it was not speaks to the second underlying issue at play in this ad, which is in some ways the fundamental issue at play in all these satires. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century there was a shifting sense of what it meant to be Jewish in America. In an earlier time a nationally televised act turning a rabbi into a car shill of questionable ethics would have been seen as poor taste at best. But in this period attitudes toward what could safely be satirized changed, and while *Saturday Night Live* has tended to be at the leading edge pushing the boundaries of

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<sup>27</sup> In general only Reform congregations call themselves "Temple."

<sup>28</sup> Radner was in this ad as well in the background as the mother of the newborn; she was SNL's go-to Jew for most of her time on the show. But perhaps the most controversial and therefore infamous of the faux-mercials was Gilda Radner's 1980 spot for "Jewess Jeans." In particular people reacted poorly to the line "She shops the sales for designer clothes/She's got designer nails and a designer nose." Ann Beatts, another Jewish woman who wrote for SNL from its inception until 1980 described Radner as someone who drew comedy from her own experiences and her own pain, but who "refused to apologize for being beautiful at the same time" (PBS, *Make 'Em Laugh*, 2009). There was a degree of defiance in the "Jewess Jeans" sketch that involved contravening the conventions of what female comics should say and do, which could have something to do with why the sketch was controversial. The ad presents the Jewess as aspirational, but does it through the repetition of several long-standing anti-Semitic tropes. Radner clearly saw the ad as reclaiming a space for a Jewish woman to be desirable and for a comedian to be beautiful, but the audience reacted poorly to what they saw as just another stereotypical JAP being played for laughs.

what is acceptable, the reaction to this sketch shows it as in-bounds. As we have seen time and again, throughout the 1960s, 70s, 80s and even into the 90s Judaism was increasingly set aside and made into a Thing. So *Jewess Jeans*, with its critique of Jewish social life and moral standards, is threatening, challenging, and upsetting (along with being funny to many people). An opportunistic and profit-motivated rabbi is not challenging because the rabbi with his Old World accent stands for religious traditions and vestiges of life that are quickly being abandoned and therefore are non-threatening when lampooned. All Jews have culture, after all, but not all attend synagogue or care much about the way the nation as a whole feels about rabbis.

So making fun of *Jews*, as *Jewess Jeans* seemed to, is going to ruffle some feathers. But making fun of *Judaism* goes unremarked-upon, at least in 1977. This demonstrates the generational difference about attitudes towards Judaism and satire. We have already seen a demonstration of this in the textual parodies in chapter 2, and this point will be made again in a few pages when we compare the treatment of the Old World Rabbi we have just discussed from SNL to the Old World Rabbi in the Coen Brothers' *A Serious Man*. For the moment, however, let us turn to a second example of circumcision humor to conclude our discussion of this defining ritual.

### **The Bris**

*Seinfeld* is, of course, one of the quintessential TV shows of the 1990s and is to TV what Woody Allen is to movies; namely the first thing most people think of when you say "Jewish humor." Ironically, however, *Seinfeld* not only rarely makes reference to religion at all, but the writers and performers purposely play fast and loose with our assumptions

about Jewish characters. Based on the sheer quantity written about *Seinfeld* and Judaism as compared to other shows one would assume that it was a show about Jews, at least.<sup>29</sup> In reality, however, of the main characters only Jerry himself is actually Jewish. Despite George being written as a stereotypically Jewish character (and his parents being written and performed as *very* Jewish) and Elaine being often seen as a “Jewish American Princess type,” neither character is Jewish. Jason Alexander and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, who play George and Elaine are Jewish or from Jewish families.<sup>30</sup> The inspirations for the characters, according to the writers, were Carol Leifer and Jason Alexander himself, both Jews. There is some question as to whether Kramer is Jewish. Unlike George and Elaine, who the show makes explicit over the years are not Jewish, Kramer is a bit more of an enigma. But if he is Jewish it is never mentioned. He is just never explained to be NOT Jewish. So it is with their tongue firmly in their cheeks that the writers set out to make the most Jewish non-Jews on television.

Nathan Abrams, in *The New Jew in Film* discusses the ways that “Jews” have been coded on screen, at least through *Seinfeld’s* era. He says representations of Jews have been, “racialized and anti-Semitic; invisible or nonexistent; idealized, de-Judainized and de-Semitized; often replaced by the Gentile mimicking the Jew; ethnicized, anxious, and neurotic; or victimized and humiliated. Furthermore... [there] were certain recurring stereotypical tics...including fast-talking intelligence, physical weakness, small stature,

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, David Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life, ed. Jonathan D. Sarna and Sylvia Barack Fishman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 201-217, and Vincent Brook, *Something Ain’t Kosher Here: The Rise of the “Jewish” Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 118-128, both of which use *Seinfeld* as their case study and primary stand-in for all the sitcoms with Jewish characters that appeared in the 1990s, despite something like *Friends* running for longer and having more Jewish characters.

<sup>30</sup> Julia Louis-Dreyfus does not identify as Jewish, but her father’s family is the wealthy French Jewish Louis-Dreyfus family, which includes Alfred Dreyfus of the Dreyfus Affair.

and sexual preference for the blonde *shiksa*.”<sup>31</sup> The characters on *Seinfeld* tick almost every box, especially the “Gentile mimicking the Jew” which is what George and Elaine could be seen as doing, though the Jewishness of Alexander and family history of Louis-Dreyfuss make them almost Jews mimicking gentiles mimicking Jews.

This is a phenomenon that Vincent Brook identifies as “conceptually Jewish” characters vs “perceptually Jewish” characters.<sup>32</sup> Conceptually Jewish characters are those who are Jewish by design, but that fact may seldom or even never come up in the show itself. Examples include Monica, and Rachel from *Friends* or Fran on *The Nanny*.<sup>33</sup> The opposite of this are characters who are “perceptually Jewish,” which means that the audience reads them as Jewish, but they actually are not. George and Elaine are both examples of this, and it is by no means accidental. Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David, and Larry Charles, all of whom are Jewish, were the head writers and producers of *Seinfeld* and knew exactly what they were doing in making the religious identity of their characters so seemingly clear, but in reality quite muddy. This makes those instances in which the show did address religion explicitly somewhat chaotic, which was their goal, because the

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<sup>31</sup> Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>32</sup> Vincent Brook, “Bring in the Klowns: Jewish Television Comedy Since the 1960s,” in *Jews and American Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Buhle (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2007), 1: 248-249.

<sup>33</sup> These characters are also part of a larger problem which Brook calls the “tendency to erase female, as opposed to male, markers of Jewishness.” Ross on *Friends* is much more clearly Jewish; he dressed up as the Holiday Armadillo to tell his son Ben the story of the Maccabees for Hanukkah for example. He becomes more Jewish as his son grows up because he has a desire to transmit his Jewishness to Ben. When he has a daughter, Emma, with Rachel we see none of the same things, despite Emma having two Jewish parents. So clearly Monica in particular is Jewish because she is Ross’ sister, but the way the show treats their religious identities is quite different, and we see the same gender disparity being played out again in Ross’ two differently gendered children. Very few Jewish women on television ever *do* Judaism, while men are more often given some relationship to their faith (see the character of Howard on *The Big Bang Theory* for another example).



audience would be faced with settings and situations that are dissonant with their (usually false) understandings of who the characters are.

The episode in which I think *Seinfeld* did this best is one called “The Yada Yada” which revolves around Jerry’s dentist, Tim Whatley, converting to Judaism. Within a day Dr. Whatley is telling Jewish jokes because he claims “I am a Jew, I can tell these jokes” and this bothers Jerry who thinks he only converted for the jokes. Dr. Whatley also continues to tell Catholic jokes, because he used to be a Catholic. When Jerry goes to Dr. Whatley’s priest to complain the priest asks Jerry if this behavior offends him “as a Jewish person” to which Jerry responds “no, it offends me as a comedian!” At the end of the day THAT is Jerry’s primary identity marker and the thing that, when threatened, causes him to lash out. It is not his Jewishness, but his “comicness” that he needs to defend and protect.

This take on identity was never more clearly on display than in the episode “The Bris.” The episode was the fifth of *Seinfeld*’s fifth season, originally airing October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1993. In this episode Jerry and Elaine are made godparents to the newborn son of their friends Stan and Myra. This, they are told, primarily entails their roles in Stephen’s *bris* in eight days.<sup>34</sup> Elaine is to choose the *mohel* while Jerry will be holding baby Stephen during the ritual. Although the episode never mentions the specifics of this role, they actually portray a very traditional scenario. The *sandek* who holds the baby is traditionally a respected Jewish male, and Jerry is apparently liked by this couple much more than he likes them in return. And though it is not referred to in the episode, there is

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<sup>34</sup> I think it is intentional that the baby was given an extremely non-Jewish name because it establishes the level of religiosity for the family, but I think it is probably a coincidence that they chose the name of someone considered to be one of the most anti-Jewish saints of the early Christian period. It may not be an accident; Larry Charles is very well-read and interested in religion as an intellectual pursuit, but if it was intentional it was a joke they had to have expected *very* few watchers to really get.

an empty chair next to the one in which Jerry sits for the ritual, which traditional Jews often do to leave a place for the Prophet Elijah should he (or his spiritual presence) return during the ceremony. These may both be accidental, but it is interesting how traditional the representation of the *sandek* and the *bris* is. Just using the words “*bris*” and “*mohel*” shows that Larry Charles, the writer for this episode was going for more insider jokes than the SNL writing staff had been. *Seinfeld* is a show about New York, and New York, for good or ill, is the most Jewish city in the United States. So is Charles speaking to Jews? To New Yorkers? To New Yorkers now living in LA, as the cast and crew of the show were? To people who want to be New Yorkers? In truth, it was probably a combination of all of these.

Larry Charles is one of the reasons I said that this chapter deals with liminal identity more than the preceding chapter or the one that will follow it. Charles is actually neither clearly in the third generation, nor in the contemporary one. Larry David (b.1947), Jerry Seinfeld (b. 1954), The Coen Brothers (b. 1954 and 1957), and Larry Charles (b. 1956) are all in-between; they are members of the Baby Boom generation. You would expect, therefore, that they exhibit elements of both treatments of Judaism, and they do. *Seinfeld* premiered in the late 80s, so the work he, David, and Charles did on the show, especially early on, feels more in line with the attitudes and treatment of religion we have seen from the third generation satirists. *Seinfeld* never really broke out of that, so by the end there were things about the show and the characters that began to feel dated or anachronistic, such as the much-maligned finale. Charles went on to write for David’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, HBO’s *Entourage*, and Sasha Baron-Cohen’s film *Borat* all of which exhibit an attitude towards Jews and Judaism that is much more

aligned with twenty-first century and shows contemporary sensibilities. In this episode, however, we clearly see the conflict at work as traditional details of the ritual are included, even when they are not referenced and do not really need to be there, while at the same time the ritual goes all-wrong, which would speak to its status as a Thing. “You try to perform antiquated, barbaric rituals, you have to expect to get terrible results,” the episode seems to say.

One of the most interesting features of the episode is the role of Kramer. Though character development was never *Seinfeld*’s primary goal, Cosmo Kramer is still notably less well-rounded than the other characters. He is manic, unpredictable, inappropriate, and strange. He is based on Kenny Kramer, a Jewish comic, but played by Michael Richards, a non-Jewish actor.<sup>35</sup> Like most of the characters on *Seinfeld* Kramer is perceptually Jewish and yet he vocally and vehemently speaks against the ritual circumcision of baby Stephen throughout the episode. He calls it outdated, comparing it to other ancient rituals like human sacrifice. He calls it “a barbaric ritual,” claims the argument that circumcision is hygienic is a “myth,” argues that the ritual “cuts off a piece of [Stephen’s] manhood,” and eventually tries to steal and run away with the baby before the *mohel* can perform the deed.<sup>36</sup> The best the opposition can muster is Jerry’s argument

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<sup>35</sup> In fact, after Michael Richards’ infamous racist rant in 2006 many sources, including at least one other comedian (Paul Rodriguez) criticized Richards, saying he should know better than to be so bigoted because of the way Jews have been historically treated (see “Michael Richards: Still Not a Jew,” *Jewish Journal*, 20 November 2006, online at <[http://www.jewishjournal.com/television/article/michael\\_richards\\_still\\_not\\_a\\_jew\\_20061121](http://www.jewishjournal.com/television/article/michael_richards_still_not_a_jew_20061121)> [accessed 11 March 2015]). Other people claimed that Richards was not born Jewish, but had converted (Associated Press, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3334319,00.html>), accessed 13 March 2015). He did not, but his affiliation with *Seinfeld*, even playing a character who is not necessarily Jewish, continues to cause confusion over his religious orientation.

<sup>36</sup> Ritual theorist Arnold van Gennep also believed that the role of circumcision in modern Judaism was out of place. “it is really regrettable that the Jews should have practiced it, for as a result Bible commentators have given it a place apart which it in no way deserves. If the Jews had linked themselves with Yahweh by perforating the septum, how much fewer would have been the errors in ethnographic literature?” (Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Reprint ed. [New York: Routledge, 2004], 72-73).

that it is an ancient ritual (which prompted the human sacrifice comparison) and the *mohel* himself who announces that everyone has gathered to witness “a sacred, ancient ceremony symbolizing the covenant between God and Abraham. Or something.” Kramer speaks passionately against the alleged barbarism of circumcision while the traditional camp can only come up with “Or something.” It is the hallmark of a calcified tradition—Thing that one cannot even come up with a convincing argument for why a ritual is performed beyond “tradition.” Kramer seems to have the moral high ground here.

In fact, there is a throw-away line towards the end of the episode that further indicates that Larry Charles’ views are more in line with Kramer’s than Jerry’s. The circumcision does not go off without a hitch (apparently because Jerry “flinched,” though we do not see it happen) and Jerry’s finger gets cut badly enough to require stitches. As George and Elaine drive him to the hospital Jerry whines about his finger from the backseat, complaining about the *mohel*, the blood, that it is his “phone finger,” and at one point saying “I am going to need stitches; I’ll be deformed!” The line goes by without comment, but when viewed as part of a larger statement about circumcision it is difficult to not see it as an ironic statement from the writers; Jerry pooh-poohed Kramer’s argument against the barbarity of circumcision, but is aghast that his finger might be “deformed” in the process.

The *mohel* himself is a complete caricature. He is jumpy, nervous, apparently hates crying babies, and delivers all his lines as though the stage directions read “*like Rodney Dangerfield, only hysterical and shrill.*” Elaine claims he came “highly recommended,” but it is difficult to see how since he screams at everyone present, goes into an apoplectic fit over where Elaine placed her wine glass, and ultimately cuts Jerry

along with Stephen. He and the rabbi from the *SNL* ad are cut from similar cloth in that both reduce what should be a respected religious functionary who is performing a deeply meaningful ritual into a socially tone-deaf farce. And yet, like with the *SNL* ad, there was really no negative response to this episode. In fact, *Seinfeld* really never got criticized for its treatment of religion.<sup>37</sup> It is here that the Baby Boom begins to resemble the contemporary. Apparently, by this time, American Jews were willing to laugh at themselves in a way they were not a decade earlier when Jewess Jeans caused such an uproar. The third generation largely protected the Jewish people, but the contemporary generation does not. The Baby Boom generation spared no one and nothing. They continued the transformation of religion into a Thing while also opening up the door to the critique of Jews being humorous and not threatening.<sup>38</sup> Larry Charles went on to direct Bill Mahr's anti-religion documentary *Religulous*, so if you wanted to see him as an anti-religious figure the proof is all there. But *Seinfeld* was so embraced by the Jewish community for setting off the renaissance of Jewish characters on prime time TV that it really could do no wrong.

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<sup>37</sup> The only major controversy was over the episode "Puerto Rican Day" which was blasted for being racist. But the show had already lost the benefit of the doubt about race by that point. It was the last stand-alone episode of the last season, and *Seinfeld* had long been under fire for the lack of racial diversity on the show. It apparently filmed in the same part of NYC that Woody Allen used; i.e. the part of New York peopled entirely by white folks.

<sup>38</sup> It helps that American Jews seemed to feel a sense of ownership of *Seinfeld* that was unparalleled at least on television, and matched possibly only by Woody Allen films in the 70s and 80s. Because they felt such pride they allowed it greater critical room.

### The Bar Mitzvah—Background

The *bar mitzvah* is the second major lifecycle ritual of a Jewish boy's life. Although statistics and tradition indicate that the *bris* is the ritual par excellence, for those who undergo a *bar mitzvah* it is much more central to their personal religious perception since they neither remember nor played any sort of active role in their own *bris*. References to and jokes about the *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, are, therefore, almost as common as those about circumcisions. The phrase "today you are a man" has been uttered as a joking reference to someone's achievements innumerable times.<sup>39</sup> So the *bar* (or *bat*) *mitzvah* occupies a different space than does the *bris*. It is more public, more widely known, and more memorable. The *bar mitzvah* has developed over centuries, dating back to the Middle Ages when Judaism began to develop something resembling the *bar mitzvah* we know today.

The *bar mitzvah*, then, plays a much larger role in autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works because the memory or nostalgia aspect places it in a different category. M. Gail Hamner writes of the relationship between nostalgia and ritual, "ritual, like the nostalgia that feeds it, is a double edged-sword, potentially either desiccating life or nourishing it."<sup>40</sup> There is an intractable relationship between ritual and nostalgia, because ritual is always, on some level, the physical enactment of tradition, and tradition

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<sup>39</sup> As mentioned above, the male-ness of these rituals is problematic. Though the more liberal branches of Judaism do now perform bat mitzvahs as well, they do not carry the same weight of tradition because they are more recent and have less historical baggage. Historically, becoming an adult male from a Jewish perspective was important because it allowed you to count towards a *minyan*, be called to the Torah, obligated you to observe the 613 mitzvot, and allowed you to testify in a court of law. None of these are things women in traditional Judaism were allowed to do, so there was no need to recognize a young woman's passage to adulthood.

<sup>40</sup> M. Gail Hamner, *Imagining Religion in Film: The Politics of Nostalgia*, New Approaches to Religion and Power, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 20.

is just another aspect of nostalgia. So Hamner's point is well-taken here, in particular, because the argument that the bar mitzvah is represented in satire disproportionately makes more sense when viewed as, not only a function of nostalgia, but then also something that "nourishes" life. Living things crave nourishment, and if ritual can actually nourish, then perhaps that is why, after a generation of ritual starvation, the contemporary satirists seem so desperate to find a new place for ritual.

As Ronald Grimes tells us "because social density is so typical of ritual, ritual actions are usually *interactions*."<sup>41</sup> Whether or not a child has much true choice in undergoing the *bat* or *bar mitzvah*, it is nonetheless quite interactive and it is she or he alone who is in front of the congregation, reading and speaking, regardless of how much her or his parents and tutors may have pushed and coached her or him. The child undergoing the *bris* has no agency at all (which of course is one of the major reasons there is an anti-circumcision movement growing worldwide) and he is in no way interactive with either the *mohel* or *sandek*. The baby moves, but the *bat* or *bar mitzvah* girl or boy acts, because, as Grimes says, "human intention is what distinguishes action from movement."<sup>42</sup>

There could be said therefore to be a potential psychological difference between what is being satirized when one uses the *bris* as one's canvas as opposed to using the *bar mitzvah*. Because the *bris* exists in people's memories only in theory, they are more likely satirizing an entire religious system through the use of the *bris* as a synecdoche for the whole of Judaism. A man cannot have a memory of the *bris* being enacted upon his

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<sup>41</sup> Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, Oxford Ritual Studies Series, ed. Ronald Grimes, Ute Husken, and Eric Venbrux (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 243.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 243

own body, so he is drawing not on personal memory but on cultural memory when he describes the scene. Even more so if a woman were to be the one describing the scene; she not only has no physical memory but also has no bodily stake in the conversation. On the other hand, when a Jewish satirist uses a *bat* or *bar mitzvah* she or he is more likely making a more personal or familial statement. They may bring stereotypes of the whole of American Judaism into the scene (as the ballooning cost and materialism of contemporary *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is a popular focus of satiric barbs), but the template upon which they are building their satire is more likely to be their own personal and family history.

### A Serious Man

Joel and Ethan Coen were raised in a Jewish suburb of Minneapolis, MN, which makes them different from the *SNL/Seinfeld* crowd who represent the NYC/LA experience of the majority of American Jews. Current estimates show only about 40,000 Jews in Minneapolis against a city population of 400,000, so while it is a city with a long history of having a small but robust Jewish community, the Coens grew up not surrounded and saturated by Judaism the way Jews in New York or Los Angeles did.<sup>43</sup> This, I would argue, has a direct impact on why their satire looks more like the contemporary generation's than the third generation's. These Baby Boom children of the 1950s are the bridge generation between the satirists born in the 1930s (Allen, Heller, Roth, Malamud) and those born in the 1970s (Englander, Tropper, Westfeldt). Those, like Seinfeld, who

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<sup>43</sup> Ira M. Sheskin, "2004 Twin Cities Jewish Population Survey," online at <<http://www.jewishdatabank.org/studies/details.cfm?StudyID=421>> (accessed 5 March 2015).



grew up in heavily Jewish surroundings seemed to suffer the same religious fatigue as their parents and leaned towards making Judaism into a Thing. Those who grew up more isolated, like the Coens, have leaned towards revivifying it. Even the presence (or absence) of Judaism conforms to this model. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s *Seinfeld* played fast and loose with audience assumptions about the Jewishness of the characters, and Judaism was always both there and not there, just as it has been for third generation satirists like Allen and Roth. The majority of the Coen Brothers' films in the 1980s and 1990s were not at all Jewish; one or two had nominally Jewish character (such as Barton Fink), but there was no aura of Jewishness in their films. It is arguable that it was only in *The Big Lebowski* in 1998 that they began to engage with Judaism in any real way ("I don't roll on Shabbos..."), and even that is slight, so although they are Baby Boomers as well, their real engagement with Jewish rituals and traditions on film are more twenty-first century than twentieth.

The Coen Brothers have always chosen films that interest them, and have always been involved in as many aspects of the filmmaking process as possible. They have not, therefore, produced at the rate of someone like Woody Allen who makes a film per year, but they have averaged more like a film every two years over their (to-date) thirty year career. The majority of their films have been dark, dark comedies almost all involving crime or criminals. In Joel's mind, however, their Judaism is there in their films even when not explicit because, "there's no doubt that our Jewish heritage affects how we see things."<sup>44</sup> From an audience standpoint, especially in the Jewish or Judaism-adjacent portion of the audience the perceptual Judaism of the Coens may also influence how their

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<sup>44</sup> City Mouse Online, Haaretz Service and Amit Kling, "Coen Brothers: Boycotting Israel Is a Mistake," *Ha'aretz*, 15 May 2011, online at <<http://www.haaretz.com/culture/coen-brothers-boycotting-israel-is-a-mistake-1.361926>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

films are viewed. “Coen” is a very common Jewish surname, even with the slightly rarer h-less spelling, and Joel and (to a lesser extent) Ethan are also common Jewish first names, so an assumption that the filmmakers are Jewish could lead to seeing more Judaism in the films than might otherwise be apparent. To the Coen Brothers Judaism was a piece of their background; one they acknowledged as important, but that they did not feel the need to exploit or explore. That changed in 2009 when they co-wrote and co-directed *A Serious Man*.<sup>45</sup>

*A Serious Man* is their only truly semi-autobiographical film to date. Although the characters and situations are predominantly fictional, they set the film in the same suburb of Minneapolis in which they grew up, in the 1960s, so the world of the film and much of the *mise en scène* is drawn from their experience. They even searched for a location with homes and yards that still looked the way their neighborhood had looked in the 1960s.<sup>46</sup> In this film they wanted to capture and share something of the Jewish world they remembered from their childhood. The very fact that they expressed their nostalgia in these warm terms is evidence of the way they see their Jewish upbringing differently than the jaded anti-religion satirists who came before them.

They opened the film with a short vignette that takes place on a snowy night in a nineteenth century Polish shtetl. The scene is performed entirely in Yiddish, allowing a twenty-first century audience possibly their last opportunity to see Fyvush Finkel perform in the milieu that launched his career. Jeffrey Shandler, in a special issue of the *AJS Review* devoted to the film said of the opening vignette, “The prologue presents the shtetl

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<sup>45</sup> They have only co-directed 6 of their 19 films; more often Joel directs alone.

<sup>46</sup> Campbell, Tim. “Coen Brothers to Get ‘Serious’ in Minnesota,” *Star Tribune*, 28 September 2007, online at <<http://www.startribune.com/entertainment/movies/11525326.html>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

as a lost locus of a thoroughly Jewish way of life, marked as such by the use of Yiddish. This bygone milieu is imagined as including both a traditional engagement with the supernatural in the course of daily life (you open the door, and in walks a dybbuk) and a traditional skepticism about this engagement (a dybbuk? Are you kidding?)”<sup>47</sup> Their desire to present “a lost locus of a thoroughly Jewish life” effects the opposite of Thing-making, because it reinvigorates a lost tradition and reminds one of the vigor or bygone Jewish days. The brothers Coen themselves have remained relatively mum on precisely what the audience is supposed to take away from this scene, although Joel has acknowledged that they intended the prologue to “discomfit” the audience.<sup>48</sup>

The remainder of the film is about the Gopnik family, specifically the trials and tribulations of the uber-schlemiel Larry Gopnik. His wife is demanding a divorce so she can marry another man, his bid for tenure is going poorly, his brother is under investigation for solicitation and sodomy, and his wife has taken all their money and the house, leaving him penniless and homeless. When it looks as though things could not get any worse, he and his wife’s fiancée are in almost simultaneous car accidents, and though he is okay, Sy is killed and his wife insists that Larry must pay for Sy’s funeral because there is not anyone else to do it. To this point in the film it is not unlike any other Coen brothers film; it is dark, depressing, and highlights the worst of human behavior. But it is how Larry deals with his trials and tribulations that sets him apart from other Coen anti-heroes, and sets the Coen’s apart from the previous satirists. In his darkest moment, Larry turns to Judaism, a decision that seems to have both positive and negative ramifications

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<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey Shandler, “‘Serious’ Talk,” *AJS Review* 35, no. 2 (2011): 349.

<sup>48</sup> Dave Calhoun, “The Coen Brothers Discuss ‘A Serious Man,’” *Time Out*, online at <<http://www.timeout.com/london/film/the-coen-brothers-discuss-a-serious-man-1>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

throughout the film. Judaism does not solve Larry's problems directly, but his son's bar mitzvah is shown to be the first positive step toward a possible brighter future for the Gopniks.<sup>49</sup>

There are two primary commentaries about Jewish ritual in the second half of the film. First, there is the treatment of the three rabbis at the Gopnik's synagogue. They are not unlike the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future (or possibly Goldilocks and the Three Bears), and they represent both the best and the worst about religious functionaries. The second commentary comes through the depiction and aftermath of Danny Gopnik's bar mitzvah. Danny's bar mitzvah is, potentially, a pivotal moment in the film and the ritual is shown to have transformative power, if not on Danny himself, then on his parents.

Larry's forays into spiritual guidance present rabbis that are similar to the risible figures from *SNL* or *Seinfeld*. The senior rabbi, Rabbi Marshak, is never available. So Larry meets first with Rabbi Nachter, the middle rabbi, who tells him a long, vaguely kabbalistic story about Dr. Sussman the dentist and "the goy's teeth." Larry wants straightforward answers about what he should do regarding Sy's funeral and his estranged wife, and he is given incomprehensible anecdotes. Then he meets with the junior rabbi, Rabbi Scott, who seems entirely uncomfortable with trying to counsel an older congregant about issues such as marital infidelity and divorce. He tries to explain losing God by talking about what aliens might think if they saw the Temple parking lot, but this obviously makes even less sense than the story Rabbi Nachter told. Neither of

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<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that in addition to the slightly inscrutable opening the film also has a very open-to-interpretation ending in which everyone may live happily ever after, but it is also very likely that they are all about to be killed in a violent natural disaster and that even if they survive, Larry probably has terminal cancer.

these rabbis give any more of a positive impression than Rabbi Taklas, even if they are not quite as much of a sell-out. If Larry's experience were all we had in the film, then it would be safe to say that the Coen's present just as negative and Thingish a picture of religious functionaries as *SNL* and *Seinfeld*.

But while Larry never does get to see rabbi Marshak, Danny does. Danny walks through heavy wooden doors into a dark office full of books and old, dark, wooden furniture. There sits wizened but nevertheless imposing Rabbi Marshak. He looks at Danny, and then proceeds to quote two lines from Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love" as he passes Danny back the portable radio that had been taken from him in school early in the film. His admission that he listened to Danny's radio, and found something of value in Danny's music makes him immediately more human. All Rabbi Marshak says to Danny is "be a good boy," and yet that advice is clearer and more useful than anything the younger rabbis said to Larry. Like Rabbi Taklas, Rabbi Marshak has an Old World accent, and in him you see a connection to the vignette at the beginning of the film; there is nostalgia for the old locus of a totalized Jewish life, what Hamner calls, "the felt tension between irrevocable loss and hope for a world that is different."<sup>50</sup> That loss-plus-hope, or at least loss-plus-beauty is what sets this apart from the *SNL* faux-merical; there was no hope there. There was not even really a sense of loss. There was only satire. The Coens treat the younger rabbis the way third generation satires tended to; as ridiculous and unhelpful. But the *rabbinate* still has value, as the portrayal of Marshak shows. They may have a problem with some of the people who hold that office, but they are not writing off the rabbinate as a whole, which means they are not writing off the importance

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<sup>50</sup> Hamner, *Imagining Religion in Film*, 25.

of religious functionaries in the lives of their congregants. They treat the bar mitzvah in much the same complicated way.

Danny Gopnik's bar mitzvah is the central moment of the film's third act. Much of the action and angst of the film has been building towards the moment when Danny ascends the *bima* to undergo this coming-of-age ritual. The scene is handled with a combination of nostalgic reverence and Coen-esque irreverence. Through the use of a wide shot we see a lovely synagogue with an open (and interestingly Sephardic) floor plan and four men standing around the open Torah scroll while one of them chants the blessings before the reading of the Torah in a lovely baritone. But then we switch to a close-up of Danny, and what he is seeing and experiencing. He stares, slack-jawed, at the *bima* and the shot takes on a fuzzy-around-the-edges quality because in addition to being nervous, Danny is stoned out of his mind. Throughout the film the audience knows that Danny has a bit of a marijuana habit, and just before Danny's big moment we saw a five second scene of two sets of shiny dress shoes (that we can only assume belong to Danny and his friend) crammed into a bathroom stall with three or four joint-ends on the floor and the sounds of smoking from within.

In this scene the Coens do something very similar to what Jennifer Westfeldt has done in her work (to be discussed in the next chapter), and what seems to be indicative of a different attitude towards Judaism in twenty-first century writing and film. The ritual itself is aesthetically pleasing. It is not commercialized, it does not result in mishaps or trips to the hospital, no one is railing against the barbaric, tribal nature of the ritual, what we see of it is simple, traditional, and appreciated by the congregation. It is, once again, individual Jews and Jewish families that are being put on satiric display, not the practice

of Judaism. As Danny approaches the *bima* the film switches to a point of view shot in which the world tilts crazily and Danny is surrounded by a sea of Kafkaesque faces staring at him, surrounding him, pressing in on him. When he gets to the *bima* he does not seem aware he is standing on a box he ought not to be. He seems utterly befuddled by the *yad* (pointer) the cantor is handing him to aid in reading his Torah portion, the Hebrew letters seem to swim on the page in front of him, he cannot find the proper starting place, and even once directed to the proper place he stares, blankly, as the cantor twice chants the first few words to Danny to jog his memory. Finally, all the training and practice kick in and he begins to chant the portion on his own.

We see only a second or so of Danny actually chanting, and then the scene cuts to a point at which his work is done, as he sits on the *bima* listening to someone drone in the background. His posture and body language have not changed and he looks just as stoned as he did before. On the surface at least becoming a man has not made a significant impression on Danny. It has, however, made an impression on his parents who are sitting together, beaming, and perhaps reconciling as they stare in rapt adoration at their son. This is important because it presents the bar mitzvah as being similar to the circumcision in that the ritual is transformative, but not for the person actually undergoing the life cycle transition. The baby experiences nothing but pain and fear through the circumcision; his entry into the Jewish people is as a passive recipient of the ritual. Danny's passage into Jewish adulthood is similarly passive; he performs more of a role than does the circumcised baby, but he seems to outwardly—or inwardly—change just as little as the baby did. His family, however, has benefitted greatly from the ritual. His father's tenure case seems to have been helped by the fact that his department chair is

feeling warm and generous in the afterglow of a successful addition of another link to the chain of Jewish tradition, and his estranged parents seem as though they may be coming back together as a couple through their experience of the bar mitzvah. Far from being pointless or a Thing, this ritual unites a family and a congregation and is therefore still a very vital and functional occasion.

This also reinforces the idea that the ritual is, perhaps, more for the audience than it is for the ritual actor. David Cole, in discussing the relationship between ritual and theatre, points out that it is the audience who receives the benefit of the actor's efforts. As Grimes puts it, "actors and shamans do not teach us to journey; rather they journey on our behalf."<sup>51</sup> As mentioned above, theatre, and ritual, "render imaginative truth physical," and the intention of the ritual actor matters less than the reception by the willing and engaged audience. Danny's parents get more out of his becoming a Bar Mitzvah than does Danny himself. And a television show or film may take on ritual meaning for an audience regardless of what the creator of said film intended.

In the case of *A Serious Man*, reviewers and audiences alike derived deeper meaning from the film than even the Coen's themselves may have anticipated. It was, of course, based on their childhood, so those who wish to see it as an image of what it means to be a Jew in America in the 1960s are not stretching the meaning significantly. But there emerged in the wake of the film's premiere a consistent reading of the film as an allegorical retelling of the biblical account of Job, which actually surprised the filmmakers. A review in the *New York Times* from the day before the film premiered began, "Did you hear the one about the guy who lived in the land of Uz, who was perfect

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<sup>51</sup> Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 225.



and upright and feared God? His name was Job. In the new movie version, ‘A Serious Man,’ some details have been changed.”<sup>52</sup> This takes it for granted that the film *is* a retelling of Job, not that it could be viewed that way. The perceptual Judaism of the Coens could certainly lead viewers to derive Jewish meaning from the film. The Coens themselves, when asked point blank if Job was their inspiration, responded:

Ethan: That’s funny, we hadn’t thought of it in that way. That does have the tornado, like we do, but we weren’t thinking of that.  
 Joel: [...] we weren’t thinking this was like The Book of Job. We were just making our movie. We understand the reference, but it wasn’t in our minds.<sup>53</sup>

But nevertheless, review after review and viewer comment after viewer comment insist on scriptural meaning behind the film, which just shows the energy with which a work takes on a life (and meaning) of its own once it is released into the world. There is, perhaps, a relationship between the satires in the previous chapter and this one. If films like *A Serious Man* provide modern allegories for scripture then in addition to making Judaism no longer a Thing it may make scripture no longer a Thing as well. Like Englander’s subtle use of scripture, the meaning of which is much more in how it is taken by the reader than what is actually on the page, perhaps this veiled and obscure application of scripture is the way to make it no longer a Thing in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps there is a middle ground between Roland Barthes’ “death of the author” method of textual criticism and one that is slavishly devoted to one, author-driven set of meanings. Because while all that matters about a text or film in the long run is the way

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<sup>52</sup> A. O. Scott, “Calls to God: Always a Busy Signal,” Review of *A Serious Man*, *The New York Times*, 1 October 2009, online at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/02/movies/02serious.html>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

<sup>53</sup> “Q&A With Joel and Ethan Coen,” online at <<https://www.workingtitlefilms.com/features/qanda/id/7/q-a-with-joel-and-ethan-coen>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

society reads it, when discussing satire—and especially the way satire reflects and changes religious attitudes as I am here—authorial intent matters insofar as it is the jumping off point for the analysis. David Tollerton, in his essay “Job of Suburbia? A Serious Man and Viewer Perceptions of the Biblical” seems to walk both sides of this issue. He points out that the Coens deny the link between their film and Job, and that there are serious discontinuities between Job and Larry Gopnik. But he claims that “there is good reason” to not believe what the Coens have said, and that “their public statements should not necessarily be taken at face value.”<sup>54</sup> And the alleged discontinuities, he says, are only discontinuities to the viewers who perceive them as such because, “as Margaret Miles reflects, ‘film does not contain and determine its own meaning; meaning is negotiated between the spectator and the film.’ We might thus conclude that if a viewer comes to understand *A Serious Man* as a retelling of Job, then that is their rightful prerogative quite regardless of the intentions of its creators.”<sup>55</sup>

The film is simultaneously both an expression of the Coens’ attitudes towards Jewish ritual and religious functionaries, as well as whatever it may mean to the individual audience member. So it does not matter if Danny cares about his bar mitzvah; it is transformative to his parents. And it does not matter if the Coen Brothers intended their film to be ruminating on scripture. The film has meaning to the audience that is out of their control.<sup>56</sup> Ritual cannot be a Thing if it still performs the Durkheimian function of

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<sup>54</sup> David Tollerton, “Job of Suburbia? A Serious Man and Viewer Perceptions of the Biblical,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 15, no. 2 (2011), para. 5, online at <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol15no2/JobSeriousMan.html>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., para. 6.

<sup>56</sup> There was an entire panel at the 2010 annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies that covered Job, Rashi, and Yiddish in the film in a “lively” discussion “both among panelists and with the audience” (*AJS Review* 35, no. 2 [2011]: 347).

uniting people, and Danny's bar mitzvah certainly does that. Both rabbis (or at least Rabbi Marshak) and rituals are given the power to change people's lives in this film, which makes them very different from the rabbis and rituals of *SNL* and *Seinfeld*. And even more than the effect the ritual has on the characters in the film, the response to the film shows that a portion of the audience is reading it as a modern midrash, and it is making scripture no longer a Thing at the same time, however unwittingly. Ritual requires a community, and ritual is therefore largely *for* the community. This point about the true consumers of ritual is nowhere made clearer than in the final ritual of this chapter.

### **Death Rituals (Funerals and Shiva)—Background**

Not all cultures have formal initiation rites for newborns. Not all cultures have coming of age ceremonies. But in nearly every culture ever found on Earth there has been a ceremony marking death. Sometimes they are very simple, like sailors saying a few words before dropping a body over the side of a ship. Some are extremely complex, like the funerals of the Toraja people of Indonesia which can last weeks and are so expensive that it sometimes takes years after a person has died to raise the funds necessary to perform the funeral.<sup>57</sup> Sometimes the funeral is, at least in part, about the journey the deceased is making. But not all cultures believe in an afterlife, or believe in an afterlife that can be influenced by the funeral rite itself. So the meaning of the ritual may not be entirely for the deceased, in which case it would be, at least in part, for the community.

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<sup>57</sup> April Holloway, "The Toraja People and the Most Complex Funeral Rituals in the World," *Ancient Origins*, 24 January 2014, online at <<http://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-asia/toraja-people-and-most-complex-funeral-rituals-world-001268>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

Globally, this can be attested to by the number of cultures that include humor in their funeral rites.<sup>58</sup> You can only mourn for so long before it begins to lose meaning. If too much time passes between death and the funeral, the ritual must re-engage the mourner to avoid being what ritual theorist Tom Driver calls, “pro forma, something everybody does at times like this, so hold your breath and go through with it. The ceremony is not in the least transforming and [the mourner] knows she will have to deal with her grief some other way.”<sup>59</sup> Comic relief exists because of a basic human need to take breaks from long periods of strong emotion. Whether sadness, joy, terror, or excitement after a point you become numb to that emotion, which is not necessarily the same as “getting over” whatever the impetus for the emotion was. So these funeral rituals, in deed if not in word, acknowledge that they are for the living, for the mourners, as much if not more than they are for the dead.

This is very much the case when discussing Jewish funeral rites, specifically. Jewish funerary practices, unlike those mentioned above, do not include any elements of humor or light-heartedness. They are actually quite somber. And yet funerary and mourning practices are used as sources of humor almost as much as circumcisions and bar or bat mitzvah. Judaism has a complicated relationship to dead bodies; they are a source of great pollution in the Bible, and yet people are nevertheless (unless one is a priest) required to come into contact with them. As Sarah Coakley puts it, despite the corpse being, “a severe source of ritual contamination...the corpse has to be treated with

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<sup>58</sup> In Northern Taiwan, for example, the ritual specialist simultaneously performs mudras for the dead, and a sort of stand-up comedy stream of jokes for the living. And among the Yoruba of West Africa some funerals involve elaborate masked dances that show surrounding or enemy groups in ridiculous situations; a Hausa meat vendor stained red from nibbling his wares, a Dahomean warrior covered with boils.

<sup>59</sup> Tom Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Communities* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 5.

respect.”<sup>60</sup> One of the key moments of a traditional Jewish funeral is when the collected mourners take turns tossing a shovelful of dirt into the open grave, coming together as a community to bury the deceased. This communal burial is considered an especially laudable act. The dead cannot return the favor; you do these things because you cared about the deceased, and because you want to. You do them for *your* emotional well-being.

Jewish mourning rituals do not end with the funeral. For seven days after the funeral the family of the deceased “sits shiva.” Perhaps because this lasts so much longer than the funeral, perhaps because it is so unique to Judaism, or perhaps because it just traps a bunch of emotional people together for a long period of time, sitting shiva is a favorite topic for jokes and humor.<sup>61</sup> One example is Jonathan Tropper’s 2009 novel *This is Where I Leave You*, about a family’s shiva.<sup>62</sup> There are satires based around funerals, but there are nevertheless many fewer funerals in Jewish satire than circumcisions or bar and bat mitzvah. Perhaps this has something to do with Hamner’s earlier point that nostalgia feeds ritual. There is little nostalgia to be found with funerals. By definition you cannot remember your own, even in the abstract as one thinks back on a circumcision they do not actually remember. But neither is there in most people a desire to think back on other funerals they have attended. If there is less nostalgia available to feed the funeral

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<sup>60</sup> Louis Jacobs, “The Body in Jewish Worship: Three Rituals Examined,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 82-83.

<sup>61</sup> The popular TV show *The League* recently aired an entire episode whose tongue-in-cheek name was “Sitting Shiva.” It was a joke mainly for Jews and those who know Jewish ritual, because while there is a funeral in the episode, it was actually about winning their fantasy football league’s trophy, The Shiva (pronounced “she-va,” like the Hindu god, not “shih-va,” like the Jewish practice). Wallace Markfield wrote a novel called *To An Early Grave* in 1964 about four friends trying to attend the funeral of a fifth. Larry David, mentioned above as a creator and writer on *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* has written a play about sitting shiva called *Fish in the Dark* which will open in 2015.

<sup>62</sup> *This is Where I Leave You* was made into a film in 2014, but while Tropper wrote the screenplay a great deal was changed and I thought the book better expressed the ideas I was theorizing.

ritual, then that could make it less tangible, more ephemeral, and therefore more difficult to work with as a satiric canvas.

### **This Is Where I Leave You**

*This is Where I Leave You* was Tropper's fifth novel. It takes place, as most of his writing does, in a fictionalized version of Westchester County, NY. Tropper uses the towns and experiences of his childhood as a backdrop to his writing, but his books (and especially his young, male protagonists) are not author-analogs in the Roth-Zuckerman model. According to Tropper, "Fiction is making things up. I'm a fiction writer and my whole gift is being able to create something that sounds honest and authentic. The fact that I'd only be able to pick from my own life is ignorant."<sup>63</sup> So the Foxmans (Foxmen?) are not the Troppers, but the fictional Westchester Country nevertheless rings true to many readers because it is based on the real Westchester County. In *This is Where I Leave You* (*TIWILY*) Tropper's approach to Jews and Judaism is very similar to that of other contemporary, twenty-first century satirists.

"Dad's dead." This is the first sentence of *TIWILY*, like a modern-day "Jacob Marley was dead to begin with." The plot is slight: Mort Foxman has died, and his dying wish (to the shock of everyone) was that his family sit shiva for him. So, in typical family farce style, in troop a series of Foxpeople, each more dysfunctional than the last. The reader then spends the better part of four hundred pages being uncomfortable as people say terrible things to each other. It is part rom-com, part family saga, part midlife

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<sup>63</sup> Jeanne Muchnick, "Author Jonathan Tropper Profile," *Westchester Magazine*, January 2010, online at <<http://www.westchestermagazine.com/Westchester-Magazine/January-2010/The-Author-Next-Door/>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

coming-of-age, but what is important here is that the presence of the shiva in the story is more than a simple plot device.

Wallace Markfield's *To An Early Grave* is a good example of the way the third generation dealt with death and funeral rituals. The actual funeral—in a book about a funeral—is an afterthought; Jewish funerals are described in that book as, “One-two-three. In and out, no big deals.”<sup>64</sup> For Tropper, however, the funeral and shiva of Mort Foxman remain a constant presence throughout the book, the ritual itself drives the action, not just the lead-up to the ritual as in *To An Early Grave*. Markfield made ritual into a Thing; it was a throw away. Tropper breathes new life into it by casting it as the central character of the book. Mort Foxman, we learn throughout the book, had no more need for religion than the others of his, older, generation. When first-person narrator Judd is told that Mort requested the shiva his immediate response is, “but Dad’s an atheist.”<sup>65</sup> The rabbi at the funeral even admits that, “Mort was never a big fan of ritual...”<sup>66</sup> Yet, while this return to ritual is completely befuddling to Mort’s family, they honor his wishes and come in from near and far to sit together for a week.

The first hint that Tropper is giving ritual more purpose than his predecessors comes during the traditional tossing of dirt onto the grave by family and friends. Judd expresses emotion over the death of his father for the first time, seemingly as a direct result of this tradition. “When the dirt hits the coffin I can feel something in me start to shake,” Judd Foxman narrates.<sup>67</sup> This is a theme throughout *TIWILY*, and it is also seen

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<sup>64</sup> Wallace Markfield, *To an Early Grave* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), 60.

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Tropper, *This Is Where I Leave You* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

throughout contemporary satire (as will be discussed further in the next chapter); the redemption of religion and religious traditions from ossified Thing status is not, per se, about determining that they have any supernatural basis or purpose. When the twenty-first century satirists reclaim religion it is almost always because they show it serving real, emotional, or psychological purpose for the practitioners. If a funeral tradition can help a son mourn, that gives it purpose, and that moves it from Thing to not-Thing.

It should not be thought, however, that there is anything easy or one-dimensional about Tropper's treatment of ritual. On the Sabbath during shiva the family goes to the Temple to say Kaddish (something they only know to do because the rabbi showed up at their house and told them). This scene is actually quite similar to the Coens' bar mitzvah, complete with the Foxman brothers ending up smoking a joint in the bathroom of the Hebrew School wing of the building. So there is nothing treacly or overly pious about the arrival of the family at the Temple. But Judd says of the Kaddish, "for reasons I can't begin to articulate, it feels like something is actually happening. It's got nothing to do with God or souls, just the palpable sense of goodwill and support emanating in waves from the pews around us, and I can't help but be moved by it. When we reach the end of the page, and the last 'amen' has been said, I'm sorry that it's over. I could stay up here a while longer...I don't feel any closer to my father than I did before, but for a moment there I was comforted, and that's more than I expected."<sup>68</sup>

What clearer expression is there of the transformation of ritual from something outdated and archaic into something useful and meaningful? The fact that the responsive nature of the prayer and the "waves of goodwill" are an important part of Judd's feeling

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 228.



of comfort reiterates David Cole's idea about the performative nature of ritual as theatre and the transformative power of the audience's experience. The Kaddish in a vacuum may have had no impact on Judd, but as part of a congregation, it moves him. The shiva becomes, eventually, the only thing holding some of the Foxfolk together. As Judd reflects on the impending end of the shiva he says that the rabbi will come "lead us in a small closing ceremony, snuff out the shiva candle, and then we'll part ways, back to the flaming wrecks of our individual lives."<sup>69</sup> The shiva has given the family a focus, but now that it is about to end they will go back to being near-strangers.

This is another aspect of what both differentiates Tropper's satire from that of the earlier generation, and also saves his treatment of the shiva from being precious or saccharine. He is brutal in his treatments of people, both as individuals and as groups. In addition to the scathing depictions of most of the family members, old Jews as a group do not fare well here. Old Jewish men are lascivious and smelly and indecorous, while old Jewish women are pushy and nosy and inappropriate. He falls back on many traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes—the lecherous Jewish man, the over-bearing Jewish woman, the snobby Jewish princess, the coddled Jewish prince—in ways that are often much harsher than the things that got Philip Roth branded an enemy of the people in the 1960s. And yet those sorts of personal attacks are commonplace now. Judd says of his family that, "some families, like some couples, become toxic to each other after prolonged exposure."<sup>70</sup> The Foxmans have done and said all manner of unspeakable and awful things to each other in the week that they spent together (including lying, manipulating, ruining romantic relationships and getting into physical fights) and yet the shiva somehow also united

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

them and gave them purpose. *They* may be toxic, but the ritual was not. It makes sense then, in the closing pages of the books, when we find out that Mort actually had no dying wish at all, and it was the Foxman matriarch who concocted the dying request story in order to force her family to spend time together and mourn their father. She, it seems, already intuited how cleansing and oddly satisfying the rituals could prove to be for her children, so she manipulated them into spending an otherwise miserable week together.

Tropper and Englander wrote about Jews in very different settings, but they seem to be expressing similar sentiments about the power and importance of traditions for keeping a family afloat. These would have been impossible attitudes for a mainstream satirist of the 1960s or 1970s to express because to them organized religion, and especially the outmoded rituals thereof, were the enemies of a free, liberated, and thinking society. In Tropper's novel we find the shiva emerging as the one real interaction these people have had with each other in decades, or maybe ever. The family is combative, cold, distant, grudge-holding, and unhappy, but by actually fulfilling the Jewish funereal and mourning requirements, from burial to shiva to Kaddish to emerging out the other side they came together at least as much as they tore apart. And Tropper makes it unambiguous that it is the power of ritual and ritual performance that allows that to happen.

### **Conclusion**

Ritual is a vital part of the way Judaism is used and reimagined in popular satire. Ritual and text were chosen for this dissertation for two primary reasons, which are really only one reason. First of all, they are the most well-known or visible aspects of a religion.

People, both within and outside of Judaism, recognize scripture and circumcision and bar or bat mitzvah and funerals. If you ask someone on the street what a religious Jew *believes* you will most likely get very few responses. If you ask what a Jew *does* you are more likely to get some sort of response, whether it is “keeps kosher,” or “goes to Temple,” or even “fasts.” Rituals are the most visible expressions of a religion. The second reason—which is really a subset of the first reason—is that this is where the majority of the satiric attention is focused. But this is where the satiric attention is focused because these are the visible, outward signs of the religion.

The split between third generation and contemporary satirists shows the same pattern we saw emerge in the previous chapter. Satirists born in the third generation, by and large, target organized religion, religious leaders, sacred space, rituals and ritual objects, etc. Jewish culture, on the other hand, is generally either a backdrop or even something that is being imperiled by the backwards-looking religious traditions. Contemporary satirists take an opposite approach. They seem to feel no need to circle the wagons and protect the people. They have a less immediate relationship to the Holocaust. They lack that existential fear that the Jewish people could actually cease to be. Instead, they point their sharpest barbs at the community; at its secularity, its complacency, its materialism. But rabbis and rituals are treated more gently, and used to humanize a story, not as a punchline. The old rabbi in *A Serious Man* is sweet, understanding, and compassionate. The Kaddish in *TIWILY* is moving and emotional. Baby Boomers vacillate between these two positions, but the satires that tend to emulate one or the other follow certain logical patterns. The earlier the satire, the closer to the third generation’s model it is. And the more heavily Jewish the satirist’s upbringing was, and the more

surrounded by third generation role models they were, the more they tend to emulate the process of making religion into a Thing. The further from that example they are, both temporally and geographically, the more their satire becomes consonant with contemporary satires.

The struggle between useless Jewish-ritual-Things as seen in the *SNL* sketch or on *Seinfeld* and the powerfully transformative Jewish rituals as seen in *A Serious Man* or *This is Where I Leave You* demonstrate that this shift in consciousness is important to many contemporary Jews. Markfield's dismissive "no big deals" attitude towards Jewish ritual is unsatisfying for some, and they are fighting back against that by crafting stories in which ritual is the *only* big deal. Furthermore, while neither the Coens nor Tropper seem to be advocating a return to deference to rabbinic authority, they both push the idea that rabbis are human, complicated, real, and often even helpful. Rabbi Marshak understood Danny even when neither of the younger rabbis understood his father, and Rabbi Grodner in *TIWILY* was complicit in the plan to get the Foxman family together for shiva, perhaps because he also understood that they needed it.

Tropper and Englander both speak strongly with the voice of the younger generation, and that voice has made it clear that the gloves are off as far as critiques of the Jewish people and their social or personal habits go. They both see traditional Jewish forms (text, ritual) as things of use and value, but will not tread lightly in their satiric critique of Jews in general. This is in stark contrast to their forbearers who threw their most scathing critique at organized religion and commitment to outdated and irrelevant religious rituals. In the final chapter we will see this story expressed one more time, shown through the ways satirists have painted pictures of what it means to be a Jew, and

how Jewish identity in America looks. This final chapter will involve all of the issues of the previous two chapters, as well as adding the more ephemeral concept of “identity.”

## CHAPTER 4: ISRAEL (IS REAL!)

Jacob Goldfarb visited the Bureau of Motor Vehicles for a driver's license. Across the desk, an interviewer asked a few perfunctory questions:

"Name?"

"Jacob Goldfarb."

"Born?"

"Russia."

"Line of work?"

"A tailor."

"Religion?"

"Catholic, what else?"

-Anonymous joke<sup>1</sup>

Who is a Jew? What does it mean to be Jewish? Where is Jewish identity seated? Is it in someone's name? Their family? Their culture? Their genes? The joke above makes reference to the fact that while the answer, halakhically speaking, is fairly simple the issue has nonetheless occupied a huge number of hearts and minds over the years.<sup>2</sup>

Someone who goes to synagogue every week, assiduously keeps kosher, and spends the Sabbath studying Talmud is nevertheless not Jewish unless they were either A) born to a Jewish mother or B) underwent a conversion. Conversely, someone who meets either of these two criteria but NEVER attends synagogue, celebrates holidays in the home, or

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<sup>1</sup> Henry D. Spalding, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor: From Biblical Times to the Modern Age* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 2001), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Although this question is not especially fraught for the purposes of this dissertation, historically speaking being "in" or "out" of Judaism had many ramifications. Shaye Cohen lays out the way "Jewishness" was constructed in antiquity and the reasons why, politically and socially, being accepted as a Jew mattered, and moving forward from that point whether you were in or out determined your fate at the auto de fe, determined whether you could live in or out of the ghetto, determined your ability to own property or not, and ultimately, of course, determined your fate during World War II. Cohen argues that "Jew" was a social demarcation as much as a religious one in antiquity, and that perhaps explains why the line between Jewishness and Judaism has remained so blurry. (Cohen. *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 13.)

observes any of the myriad laws of Judaism is undeniably Jewish. This chapter will use satires with the broadest subject, Jewishness itself, to show the ways in which third generation and contemporary satirists present even Jewishness itself differently.

Though this analysis is dealing with the post-World War II period, recall the joke Freud told about the Jews on the train. The rural Jew tries to look presentable in front of a well-dressed, presumably rich man. When, however, the rich man reveals himself to be Jewish as well, the poor Jew goes to slouching with his feet on the furniture. While conflicts between different groups of Jews are nothing new, even the portrayal of these conflicts in satire goes back well over a century. Jewishness, historically, is not quite a Thing, but it is certainly something that can be worn or not as the situation demands. The Jew on the train who can pretend not to be Jewish, or Goldfarb the tailor who can claim to be Catholic exhibit a fungible identity that is missing by the time we get to the third generation satire. The Woody Allen example in this chapter in particular demonstrates the ways that, for that generation, Jewishness was indelible even while Judaism was disposable. So while the origins of the halakha on identity are not important here, nor is probing why, exactly, this question of identity has so occupied the Jewish imagination, what is important here is that in some ways these issues have dominated humor and satire more than any other and how that relates to “the American Jewish obsession with Jewish identity.”<sup>3</sup>

In an increasingly intersectional world few people would claim to have a pure or singular identity. That issue will be discussed at greater length in this chapter, especially in the way Jennifer Westfeldt depicts identity. But intersectional identity has been seen as

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<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, “Success in Circuit Lies: Philip Roth’s Recent Explorations of American Jewish Identity,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 3 (1997): 132.

a double-edged sword for Jews and Jewishness. Shaul Magid recently argued for a model of “post-Judaism” where, “the ethnic bond is broken or dissolves into a multi-ethnic/multi-racial mix.” When that happens, “the age-old strategies Jews deployed to meet challenges of both Jewishness and Judaism become largely inoperative, since those strategies assume an ‘ethnic’ root of Jewish identity as its foundation.”<sup>4</sup> Magid argues that “while Judaism as a religion was often viewed as the glue that held the Jewish people together, the opposite has also been the case,” by which he means that during periods of Jewish diaspora (and especially in early twentieth century America), when the religious principles were under external pressure, the ethnic core of Jewishness prevailed.<sup>5</sup> Magid sees this as leading to a post-Jewish age where, “Judaism remains related to but is no longer identical with Jewishness,” and using similar logic I argue that this very process of ethnic break-down undergirds the generational shift I have been identifying.<sup>6</sup> If post-Judaism means that Judaism is now far too ethnically diverse to function as a single ethnic identity marker—and I agree that it is—then that is why the contemporary satirists are making Jewish religious traditions no longer a Thing. If the ethnic held Jews together when the religious faltered, does it not stand to reason that the religious would stand up to take the burden now that the ethnic has run its course?

Additionally, this chapter will reveal the fact that the category distinctions I have been drawing between works (scripture, ritual, identity) are, for the most part, unstable. Almost all of the satires in the previous two chapters are really about what it means to be a Jew, and the satires in this chapter are also about rituals and texts and rabbis. But what

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<sup>4</sup> Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



separates the satires in this chapter from the previous examples is that the question of what it means to be a Jew is front and center, and the examples of ritual performances or the relationship to Jewish objects are there in the service of that larger question. So we see quite clearly in this chapter not only the movement from Judaism-as-Thing to reinvigorated Judaism, but also from The Jewish People as something in need of defending to The Jewish People as something very much open to criticism.<sup>7</sup>

Comedy can also be seen as having socially transformative power. Rachel Adler, for example, says that comedy provides, “a continuous movement towards the transformation of the audience’s moral universe, a practical vision of how we are going to get from here to there.”<sup>8</sup> This urge to change society by changing the moral universe of the audience is one prominent motivation for satire, but when satire deals directly with what it means to be Jewish that urge to push and discomfit the audience becomes very clear. These satirists, both directly and through the characters who speak for them, act as tricksters. As Adler tells us, “in the trickster’s laughter there is an implicit social critique.”<sup>9</sup> Satire has never claimed to be neutral, but laughter is not neutral; *comedy* is not neutral. On the surface comedy may come across as a kinder, gentler form of critique, but it is also sneakier, occasionally reforming the audience’s moral universe without their even realizing they were being changed.

The bulk of this chapter will be on two different literary satires dealing with the troubled relationship between “assimilated” American Jews and the Eastern European

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<sup>7</sup> The recent rise in anti-Semitism in Europe and to a lesser extent here may well push this portrayal of Jews as safe back in the coming years. It will be interesting to watch the satiric response to heightening global anti-Jewish rhetoric and actions.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

refugees, or Displaced Persons (DPs) who came here after World War II. This relationship was complicated and not always positive, and both Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud wrote short stories about the repercussions of this relationship which question not only what it means to be a Jew, but even what it means to be a human being. Although they are, on the one level, very critical of assimilated American Jews, they are expressing that criticism specifically as a function of those Jews' refusal to help other, more vulnerable Jews. In both stories the Old World Jew becomes a Thing, and moreover becomes a Thing that is dangerous or problematic. So it is a harsh critique of some Jews as a defense of The Jewish People as a whole. There will then be an interlude in which the analysis of a short scene from Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* will offer some thoughts about Jewish identity vis-à-vis other religions and American consumer culture. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the film *Kissing Jessica Stein* which represents the contemporary generation's contribution to the issues of Jewish identity, including a new model of the Jewish Mother.<sup>10</sup>

### **Roth and Malamud—Background**

Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud are considered two of the greats of American Jewish literature (along with Saul Bellow). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s they dominated not just Jewish literature, but American literature. And yet, they have been treated so

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<sup>10</sup> The Jewish Mother is, of course, an entire phenomenon unto herself. From Dan Greenburg's *How to Be a Jewish Mother* (Los Angeles: Price Stern Sloan, 1964) to Zena Smith Blau's "In Defense of the Jewish Mother" (*Midstream* 13, no. 20 [1967]: 42-49) to Marnie Winston-Macauley's *Yiddishe Mamas: The Truth about the Jewish Mother* (Kansas City: Andrew McNeel Publishing, 2007), many words have been written about this much maligned figure. For that reason this chapter will not spend much time offering a pale imitation or retread of that work, and will instead focus first and foremost on other aspects of Jewish identity construction.

differently by the Jewish community as a whole. Malamud has, for the most part, been beloved while Roth (especially early in his career) was frequently excoriated and defamed from within the Jewish community, even while he was being praised and rewarded by the general literary world. Although it has taken fifty-five years, the Jewish community's reaction to Roth is finally mellowing, as is evidenced by his receiving an honorary degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2014. But even as the press presented an image of Roth redeemed, Roth himself felt that, "it's beginning to appear that I, for one, will not live to see these disapproving Jewish readers of mine attain that level of tolerant sophistication, free from knee-jerk prudery."<sup>11</sup> In general the problem has been that Malamud is considered "good for the Jews" while Roth is not. They both seem to chastise the American Jewish community and make Judaism into a Thing in similar ways, but Roth's version has always been seen as having a harder edge. Both Roth and Malamud present Judaism as a Thing that may have been relevant for Jews in the areas of first settlement, Jews who were still living in ethnic enclaves, but for Jews who have moved up and out Judaism no longer has meaning. Roth has often been labeled as a "self-loathing" or "self-hating" Jew, but that is a serious accusation with significant historical antecedents, so I would like to take a moment to unpack it a bit so that I can explain why I reject it as a label for either Roth or most other American Jews.

We do not have, in America, anything resembling the original image of a "self-loathing" Jew. Because, at most times in most places, being Jewish did bar you from being a citizen, from land ownership, or from employment, and America does not have the history of Jews hiding from, converting out of, or even betraying their religion that is

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Thurman, "Philip Roth is Good For the Jews," *The New Yorker*, 28 May 2014, online at <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/philip-roth-is-good-for-the-jews>> (accessed 5 March 2015).

found in Europe. Furthermore, American Jews were not immune to the feeling that the religion into which they were born was an impediment to their futures. In Mordecai Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization* he recounts one college student's view of his generation's (the early 1930s) response to their Jewishness: "'The great majority of Jewish youths at the colleges,' writes a Harvard graduate, 'consider their Jewish birth the real tragedy of their lives. They constantly seek to be taken for Gentiles and endeavor to assimilate as fast as their physiognomy will allow.'" <sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, despite the bumps in the road American Judaism has traveled, it has still not produced anything comparable to, say, Otto Weininger, the Austrian Jew who is often seen as the model for the self-loathing Jew. Though he died very young, before he died he achieved a measure of infamy for publishing a book (*Sex and Character*) which argued that (among other things) women are passive, unproductive, and exist only for a sexual function, that the archetypal Jew is feminine, and that Judaism is "the extreme of cowardliness."<sup>13</sup> He converted to Christianity after receiving his doctorate and killed himself at age twenty-three.

This has not stopped American Jews from continuing to call other American Jews self-loathing, even if their contribution to the field is rarely as damning and they almost never actually convert to Christianity. Probably no twentieth century American Jew received this criticism more than Philip Roth. Lawrence Mintz once claimed that "Philip Roth may just engender more passionate hostility than any writer in America."<sup>14</sup> Judaism,

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<sup>12</sup> Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. anonymous (London: Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 325.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Mintz, "Devil and Angel: Philip Roth's Humor," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 8, no. 2 (1989): 159.

in Roth, is in many ways such a Thing that it has become non-existent. His Jews so often pride themselves on their total excising of Judaism from their lives. It has been argued, however, that Roth himself is quite reliant on Judaism, at least in his fiction. Jane Statlander has called Roth a modern composer of what she calls the “Hebraic American historical romance,” saying that Roth is following in the footsteps of Hawthorne as an, “allegorist, drawing un-dimensionally compressed ideas of emblematic peoplehood with names that represent the condensation of particular qualities, attitudes, and characteristics.”<sup>15</sup> This lends credence to the idea that Roth’s critique of contemporary Judaism comes from his recognition of Judaism as a Thing and his dissatisfaction with the prevalence of that attitude. Roth and Allen could almost be seen as antipodes in that way, with Allen trying to wrest American Judaism away from the hands of religion while Roth wanted to hold a mirror up to what a society who actually followed Allen’s advice would look like.

Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1933 and published his first major work, *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959. *Goodbye, Columbus* was a collection of the titular novella and five short stories. Two of them, “The Conversion of the Jews” and the “Defender of the Faith” “made him a controversial figure in the Jewish world.”<sup>16</sup> It can be assumed that when fellow writer Leon Uris was driven to declaim self-hating Jewish authors shortly after the publication of *Goodbye Columbus*, Roth was the catalyst for his dismissal of a whole school of Jewish American writers, who spend their time damning their fathers, hating their mothers, wringing their hands and wondering why they were born. This isn’t

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Statlander, *Philip Roth’s Postmodern American Romance: Critical Essays on Selected Works*, Twentieth Century American Jewish Writers, ed. Daniel Walden, no. 15 (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Aaron Rockland, “The Jewish Side of Philip Roth,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 1, no. 2 (1975): 30.

art or literature. It's psychiatry. These writers are professional apologists. Every year you find one of their works on the best seller lists... Their work is obnoxious and makes me sick to my stomach.<sup>17</sup>

Uris' critique subtly highlights the absence of Judaism in these texts, which reinforces the idea that by the 1970s Judaism as a Thing was already well-established in third generation literature. Uris was really second generation, so although he was only a decade or so older than Roth, he had difficulty accepting the version of Jewishness that was being built by the third generation satirists. The kinds of Jews Roth was creating had determined that Jewish practices were one sacrifice they were happy to make for their shot at the American Dream. Uris and other Roth critics saw this as obnoxious, and saw his portrayal of Jews as unpleasant, conniving, and lascivious as unacceptable. But since Roth's characters are generally miserable it is not difficult to argue that he was hardly praising their choice to sacrifice religion on the altar of progress, or their misanthropy and narcissism.

After the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, it was perhaps not a given that Roth's career would flourish or that he would become one of the major critical voices in Jewish American satire. Response to *Goodbye, Columbus* was mixed. While some, like Uris, vilified Roth from the outset he also had some early support. Theodore Solotaroff, one of the leading Jewish literary critics of the 1960s and 1970s, claimed that "Roth is so obviously attached to Jewish life that the charge of his being anti-Semitic or a 'self-hater' is the more absurd."<sup>18</sup> Within five years of his arrival on the American literary scene Roth was such a controversial figure that articles like Dan Isaacs' "In Defense of Philip Roth"

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<sup>17</sup> Leon Uris, interview by Joseph Wershba, *New York Post* 2 July, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore Solotaroff, "Philip Roth and the Jewish Moralists," *Chicago Review* 13, no. 4 (1959): 89.

were already required. Isaac argued that, “when Roth is properly understood he is not only a good writer, but [he] can also be in fact ‘good for the Jews.’”<sup>19</sup> Some of the criticisms that promoted this defense seem entirely out of proportion: “One of them likened Roth to Hitler; another asserted that the Medieval Jew would have known what to do with him. And a rabbi, in a personal letter to Roth, wrote: ‘you have earned the gratitude of all who sustain their anti-Semitism on such conceptions of Jews as ultimately led to the murder of six million in our time.’”<sup>20</sup>

Roth was making strong statements about Jewish American identity in his satires, but to compare him to Hitler or effectively blame him for the Holocaust seems to be a vast overstatement. In the 1960s, however, that existential fear I have written about in previous chapters was still very real. The 1960s is the decade that really began to come to terms with the Holocaust, and this is why the majority of the satirists from that period tread lightly on the topic of “The Jews” while they ran roughshod over Judaism. Thingify Judaism; that is safe. But protect “The Jews” at all cost. One of the great paradoxes of this time is that Roth was being every bit as protective of the Jewish people as were his critics; they simply had different visions of what a healthy American Judaism looked like. Roth’s critics were, perhaps, too close to the reality of the war to see critiques of one assimilated Jewish community as not being representative of all Jews. Roth’s Jews were usually highly acculturated to American life, but through these characters Roth demonstrated what Norman Leer called, “a frame of reference...based on traditional Jewish values...it is possible to locate certain themes which seem to occur throughout

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<sup>19</sup> Dan Isaac, “In Defense of Philip Roth,” *Chicago Review* 17, nos. 2/3 (1964): 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

Biblical, rabbinic, and contemporary Jewish thought.”<sup>21</sup> The nuance of his characters’ Judaism was often glossed over in the immediate reaction to his overall depiction of Jews. But as Statlander has already argued, Roth needed Judaism just as much as Allen and Heller did. Bill Brown would agree that you cannot properly make something a Thing if you do not fully understand it. For how can you know that something both had a function and has now lost it if you do not have any real knowledge of the subject?

Identity is a central theme in Roth’s work. Critics and supporters alike have noted this throughout his career. In 1966 wrote, “it is both a sign of Roth’s intense involvement in Judaism’s deepest values, and a criticism of both the Jew and the middle-class in terms of a problem that is not so much sociological as it is spiritual and fundamentally human... ‘Eli, the Fanatic’ shows the failure of a nominal community to confront the problem of religious identity, and the attempt by one man to come by way of this identity to a closer definition of self.”<sup>22</sup> As we will see, the making of Judaism into a Thing in “Eli” could be blamed for most—if not all—of the conflict in the story. Roth was perhaps the first satirist to shine a spotlight on the relationship between the post-War turning of Judaism into a Thing and the growing problems within Jewish communities. In 1975 Michael Rockland sharpened the focus further by saying: “I believe the time has arrived when those American Jews who have regarded Philip Roth as tantamount to an enemy of the Jewish people begin to grapple with the serious problems of identity he is grappling

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<sup>21</sup> Norman Leer, “Escape and Confrontation in the Short Stories of Philip Roth,” *The Christian Scholar* 49, no. 2 (1966): 133.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 134, 142.



with.”<sup>23</sup> And Sylvia Fishman, in 1997, added the post-modern layer to the discussion when she wrote,

Roth transforms issues of Jewish identity into a plotting device by playing with the deconstructionist contention that all perceptions of the human personality can be considered works of fiction...Non-Jews, [Roth] indicates, have historically created group stereotypes of the Jews based on religious, economic, psychological, or social trends in the non-Jewish world, rather than on the realities and great diversity of the Jewish community itself...but each Jew invents shifting identities for other Jews and for him or herself.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps Roth frequently criticized American Jewish complacency, not because he hated Jews but because Jewish identity mattered to him. Malamud’s critiques were more oblique, which may be why he was not subject to the same level of criticism as Roth.

Bernard Malamud spent much of his professional career being linked to Philip Roth. Malamud was born in Brooklyn in 1914 and was therefore more a child of the Great Depression than a child of World War II. In fact, he likely would have been called to serve in World War II had he not been the only financial support his mother had after the death of his father. Furthermore, Malamud was, like Uris, actually second generation, but he nonetheless recognized the making of Judaism into a Thing in America in the 1960s and 1970s and wrote characters who much more closely resembled Roth’s Jews than Uris’. So although Roth was nearly 20 years younger than Malamud, Malamud was not the *wunderkind* (or *enfant terrible*, depending on your stance) that Roth was, and they began publishing within a few years of each other. During the post-war period it was often said that Jewish American literature was “aptly described by three words connected

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<sup>23</sup> Rockland, “The Jewish Side of Philip Roth,” 36.

<sup>24</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, “Success in Circuit Lies,” 137-139.

with hyphens: ‘Bellow-Malamud-Roth.’<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, there was a standard value judgment attached to the Roth-Malamud comparison. It generally went, “Philip Roth has been viewed as many Jews as ‘bad for the Jews’, Malamud as good.”<sup>26</sup> It is interesting, however, that Malamud was held up as “good for the Jews” in comparison to Roth as Roth’s work, across the board, was consistently more concerned with Judaism and Jewish themes. Malamud, in fact, received great acclaim for his first novel, published in 1952, *The Natural*. No one in that novel, from fictional ballplayer protagonist Roy Hobbs to his love interest Memo to Pop, the manager of Roy’s team is remotely Jewish.

The consensus on Malamud seems to be that “when he treats Jewish matters, most often he universalizes Jews, Jewish culture, history and Judaism to such an extent as to render them no more than bases from which to explore the human condition.”<sup>27</sup> Allen Guttman went so far as to say that Malamud’s definition of a Jew “turns out to be remarkably like Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative: to want for others what you want for yourself... What Malamud has done is widen the definition of ‘Jew’ to the point of meaninglessness.”<sup>28</sup> Although Malamud followed *The Natural* with *The Assistant* in 1957, which was much more clearly about Jewish characters and Jewish themes, he nevertheless did not initially attack Judaism with the same passion as Roth. Jewish characters in Malamud seemed to be Jewish more to set a certain tone or establish a certain geography than to actually question anything about the contemporary American Jewish experience. In Malamud’s early treatments of Jews, Judaism was already a Thing,

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<sup>25</sup> Edward A. Abramson, “Bernard Malamud and the Jews: An Ambiguous Relationship,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 24, Ethnicity and Representation in American Literature (1994): 146.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 118.

but that did not seem to be a problem for the Jews in the story. Their problems, and their conflicts, came from more external stimuli and not from their relationship to Judaism.

Roth himself was occasionally critical of Malamud's treatment of Judaism, though never to the extent that people were critical of Roth. He once wrote that Malamud's Jews are, "Malamud's invention, a metaphor of sorts to stand for certain possibilities and promises, and I am further inclined to believe this when I read the statement attributed to Malamud which goes 'all men are Jews.' In fact, we know this is not so; even the men who are Jews aren't sure they're Jews" in Malamud's work.<sup>29</sup> Roth also seemed to have deeply respected Malamud, even if he did not think they should be mentioned in the same breath quite as often as they were. Roth once described Malamud's project as being, "What it is to be human, to be humane, is his subject; connection, indebtedness, responsibility, these are his moral concern."<sup>30</sup> Shortly after the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus* Roth (as described by Leer) said of Malamud that while he "acknowledges the deep humanity and moral concern of his peer...Malamud 'does not—or has not yet—found the contemporary scene a proper or sufficient backdrop for his tales of heartlessness and heartache, of suffering and regeneration.'"<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Solotaroff wrote that, "While Roth is clearly writing about the modern Jew in America, Malamud appears to be writing mainly about Jewishness itself as it survives from age to age and from place to place."<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, despite Roth's concern being squarely the Jews of his day, mainly in his New Jersey environment and Malamud's concern being

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<sup>29</sup> Abramson, "Bernard Malamud and the Jews," 155.

<sup>30</sup> Helen Benedict, "Bernard Malamud: Morals and Surprises," *The Antioch Review* 41, no. 1 (1983): 30.

<sup>31</sup> Leer, "Escape and Confrontation in the Short Stories of Philip Roth," 145.

<sup>32</sup> Solotaroff, "Philip Roth and the Jewish Moralists," 90.

more universal, less religiously, geographically, or chronologically bounded, “both Roth and Malamud seem involved in a similar effort to feel and think with their Jewishness and to use the thick concreteness of Jewish moral experience to get at the dilemmas and decisions of the heart generally.”<sup>33</sup> This question, in fact, of whether the “Jewish moral experience” has some sort of life force separate from Jewish religious practices may be one of the most vital elements of both Roth and Malamud’s satire. If there is some sort of independent Jewish morality that can exist without religious Judaism, then the turning of Judaism into a Thing becomes all the more natural and understandable. But what the two stories we will examine in this chapter indicate is both Roth and Malamud imagine a world in which the conflict between Jewish identity and an absence of Jewish religiosity leads to violent confrontation.

Whereas identity could be seen as the one unifying theme in all of Roth’s work, Edward Abramson says that for Malamud the “basic theme of Jewish identity [is] one not stressed.”<sup>34</sup> Again, as Roth put it, even Malamud’s Jews are not even sure they are Jews. A generous way of interpreting this use of his characters is, in Stanley Chyet’s words, that, “writers like Malamud...are interested above all else in delineating and exploring their personalities, the characters, of their protagonists, not in exploiting them as vehicles for doctrines or creeds of any sort.”<sup>35</sup> These ideas seem borne out by Malamud’s own sense of what it means to be a writer. “The purpose of the writer,” Malamud once said,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Abramson, “Bernard Malamud and the Jews,” 150.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley F. Chyet, “Three Generations: An Account of American Jewish Fiction,” *Jewish Social Studies* 34, no. 1 (1972): 37.

“is to keep civilization from destroying itself.”<sup>36</sup> Malamud believed that the writer had an obligation to the whole of humanity more than to any single demographic group. But even Malamud’s attempt at neutrality could not change the core of his satire; whether he intended to or not, his harshest critique fell on the kind of Jew who turns his back on another Jew, and in some cases the making of Judaism into a Thing seems to be a contributing factor of that betrayal. The very idea that Judaism was only relevant to Old World Jews and had no place in a modern Jewish home undermined any relationship between modern American Jews and their European counterparts. Already mentioned above was the deeply relational quality of much of Roth’s work; Malamud’s work is in many ways equally relational, but the structure of the relationships is often quite different. In essence, David Brauner writes, “Malamud once wrote that if a Jew ever forgets he is a Jew, a Gentile will remind him, but in Roth’s novels, if a Jew ever forgets he is a Jew, it is a fellow Jew who will remind him.”<sup>37</sup>

This inability to allow Jews to forget that they are Jews is one of the obvious critical impulses behind Roth’s story, “Eli, the Fanatic.” Although Roth and Malamud did not overlap often, “Eli” and Malamud’s short story “The Jewbird” share remarkably similar satiric purpose. “The Jewbird” is everything most critics, including Roth, have accused Malamud’s work of not being: it is contemporary, specific, and most of all, Jewish. In both stories the authors take Judaism-as-Thing for granted; they agree with Allen and Heller and *SNL* and even *Seinfeld* that Judaism is a throw-away vestige of an older era. But where Judaism, and specifically Jewish traditions and rituals, are still

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<sup>36</sup> Malamud, “Not Horror but ‘Sadness’,” interviewed by Joseph Wershba, *New York Post*, 14 September 1958.

<sup>37</sup> David Brauner, “Fiction as Self-Accusation: Philip Roth and the Jewish Other,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 17 (1998): 10.

operant in these stories is to Eastern European Jews. American Jews have no time for Judaism, but that causes them to act very poorly towards those Jews who *do* have time for it, and that is a crime neither Roth nor Malamud can let stand.

### **Eli, The Fanatic**

“Eli, the Fanatic” is the final story in *Goodbye, Columbus*. It is the longest in the collection beside the novella itself. It has deep resonances in all facets of inter-Jewish conflict. “What Roth established in ‘Eli’” Sol Gittleman wrote, “[was] actually the continuity of Jewish life down through the ages.”<sup>38</sup> It shows that from the outset of his career that Roth was troubled by issues of identity. “The Defender of the Faith,” for example, also deals with issues of identity, but in that story it is the superficially shared Jewishness of two soldiers that is at issue, and not the deeper implications of that Jewishness. Private Grossbart expects special treatment from Sergeant Marx simply because they are both “members of the tribe” and throughout the story Marx does, indeed, give Grossbart special treatment, both positive and negative. “Eli” deals with what appears to be a similar situation. One Jew in the story is appealing to another to overlook the rules and allow him to do what he wants to do. But the stakes of Mr. Tsuref’s requests to Eli are much higher than those of Grossbart’s to Marx. And while both Marx and Eli snap at the end of their respective stories, Marx lashes out in anger and spite while Eli undergoes what can only be called a “religious experience,” (or at least a parody of one). In both cases religious practice is at the core of the conflict, which

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<sup>38</sup> Sol Gittleman, “The Pecks of Woodenton, Long Island, Thirty Years Later: Another Look at ‘Eli, the Fanatic’,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 8, no. 2, *The Odyssey of a Writer: Rethinking Philip Roth* (1989): 141.

indicates that even as early as 1959 the process of making Judaism into a Thing was already underway, and satirists were already picking up the theme and running with it.

“Eli” takes place in the bucolic town of Woodenton, Long Island in the year 1948.

In the period immediately following World War II there was a large-scale migration of Jews from urban areas of “second settlement” to the areas of “third settlement” in the suburbs. Many American Jews moved into these bedroom communities which were ethnically and religiously (if not racially) diverse. This migration was what Gittelman called “the culmination of the postwar American dream in suburbia.”<sup>39</sup> As mentioned above, as early as 1934 Mordecai Kaplan was already encountering young people who were trying to “pass” as gentiles; they were, for the most part, the generation that made this move away from the neighborhoods in which they grew up and into the suburbs to raise their children with a different experience of what it mean to be Jewish than the one they had. “For the Jews of Woodenton,” Gittelman argued, “there is no Torah, and, as far as Roth is concerned, no peace of mind.”<sup>40</sup> The Jews of Woodenton seem to fear what sociologists call “surplus visibility,” but what David Zurawik says ends up coming out as a Jewish critique of other Jews as being “too Jewish.” Zurawik says that this fear, “can lead to members of a minority group policing each other’s visibility and, in some cases, striving for invisibility.”<sup>41</sup> Visibility and invisibility, or even light and darkness, seem to be the primary metaphors Roth is employing to show the difference between assimilated Jewish identity (not-a-Thing) and Old World Jewish identity (Thing).

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, 6.

The Jews of Woodenton, NY are newly-transplanted suburban Jews who work in the city and then come home to their perfect houses in their perfect town. The attitude of Eli's Jewish neighbors is that they have finally "made it." They have achieved the American dream. And they react, therefore, with a typical show of fear and anger if anything appears to be threatening their perfect existence. For the Jews of Woodenton, this threat comes in the form of an Eastern European Jew by the name of Leo Tzuref who is running a yeshiva for a group of young boys who are war orphans. As if this is not bad enough (and it seems that, in fact, it *would* have been bad enough) Tzuref is also housing an adult war refugee, or Displaced Person, who is helping with the school. For the Jews of Woodenton, Gittleman says, "the Holocaust has come to Long Island and the figure of the Hassid walking down Coach House Road has enraged them."<sup>42</sup> These terrors, then, the Jews of Woodenton cannot bear; they are terrified that their gentile neighbors, if reminded too often that the Jews are Jews, will turn on them and they will have to leave the Promised Land of Woodenton.

By satirizing Jews who are terrified of being recognized as Jews, or perhaps who just do not want to be seen as *real* Jews, Roth makes argues that American Jewry as a whole has turned its back on its traditions and its people. Roth has even overdetermined the case. The Jews of Woodenton want to evict a school full of Holocaust orphans and an adult DP who were lucky to have survived. They will kick orphans and victims to the street if that is what it takes to preserve their own fragile existence. They send Eli to Tzuref to claim that "zoning laws" are the issue, but zoning laws are just a straw-man for

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<sup>42</sup> Gittleman, "The Pecks of Woodenton, Long Island, Thirty Years Later," 140.



Roth because according to Dan Isaac it is clear that, “Roth means to condemn a society that turns zoning laws into subtle instruments of persecution.”<sup>43</sup>

The Jews of Woodenton appeal to Eli in a series of increasingly free indirect, Kafkaesque statements, overwhelming him and showing us the first indications of Eli’s mental struggles with this issue. In their private conversations with Eli we see the truth of why these assimilated Jews are so scared. It is not, in fact, about zoning laws but is very clearly about their own desire to flee from a communal past in which they were forcibly marked as Jews. In Woodenton their identity is theirs to form, and they are refusing to give that up. The psychology behind their fear is quite clear:

“Eli, a regular greenhorn,” Ted Heller had said. “He didn’t say a word. Just handed me the note and stood there, like in the Bronx the old guys who used to come around selling Hebrew trinkets.”

“A Yeshivah!” Artie Berg had said. “Eli, in Woodenton, a Yeshivah! If I wanted to live in Brownsville, Eli, I’ll live in Brownsville...”

“He walked right by my window, the greenie,” Ted had said, “and he nodded, Eli. He’s my *friend* now.”

“Eli,” Artie Berg had said, “he handed the damn thing to a *clerk* at Stop N’ Shop—and in that hat yet!”

“Eli,” Harry Shaw again, “it’s not funny. Someday, Eli, it’s going to be a hundred little kids with little *yamalkahs* chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, and then it’s not going to strike you funny.”

“Eli, what goes on up there—my kids hear strange sounds.”

“Eli, this is a modern community.”

“Eli, we pay taxes”

“Eli.”

“Eli!”

“*Eli!*”<sup>44</sup>

Never mind what these DPs have gone through, they struggle of the Jews of Woodenton is not to be borne. It is a reminder of the old guys in the Bronx, of Brownsville, the greenhorn is behaving in public in a way that embarrasses the

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<sup>43</sup> Isaac, “In Defense of Philip Roth,” 94.

<sup>44</sup> Roth, “Eli, the Fanatic,” in *Goodbye, Columbus* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 255-256.

community. They seem to believe that DPs are like termites; if you ignore the presence of a few then before you know it you will have a full-blown infestation on your hands. And their memories of Judaism are so material: the trinkets in the Bronx, the *yarmulkes* they expect to see appearing in Woodenton. Judaism in Woodenton is a Thing made up of smaller Things. Not only is Old World Judaism a Thing, it is actually a dangerous Thing, and that sets Roth's satire apart. Throughout the third generation satire we see Judaism as useless, but basically benign.<sup>45</sup> But in Roth we see Jews who react to Judaism as though it is not simply useless, but could actually cause them real harm. It is not a Thing to be ignored, it is a Thing to be thoroughly avoided.

Eventually Eli focuses in on the issue of the way the greenhorn is dressed as the root of the problem and says that he and the yeshiva students can stay if they are "attired in clothing usually associated with American life in the twentieth century" when they appear in public.<sup>46</sup> The issue of surplus visibility/invisibility is most easily tackled through clothing, as that is the most immediately recognizable marker of Jewishness (or Otherness) in Woodenton.<sup>47</sup> Eli offers a compromise, instead of throwing them all out, because he has "a conflicted Jewish identity."<sup>48</sup> As we will see below, the relationship between Judaism and "stuff" runs deep, and the critique of Judaism as being more about objects than about beliefs is an old one. In Roth the fact that the greenie's clothing becomes a metonymy for the true danger of Judaism-as-Thing focuses the reader's

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<sup>45</sup> The biggest exception would be Allen, who does see organized religion, including Judaism, as dangerous and malicious.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>47</sup> C.f. Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, both of which also use clothing as a way of showing the transition from European ways to American ways among Jewish immigrants.

<sup>48</sup> James Durban, "Being Jewish in the Twentieth Century," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 21, Days of Wonder: Nights of Light (2002): 3.

attention on the role of religious objects, which in turn can focus our analytical attention on the making of religion itself into a Thing. It is here that Roth really turns up the pressure on the Woodenton Jews who are trying to conform and to live in willful ignorance of what was done to the Jews of Europe during the war. When Tzuref tells Eli that the greenie's suit is "all he's got," Eli misunderstands (perhaps purposely) and tries to pretend that they are speaking about only material possessions, only clothes.<sup>49</sup> Eli believes they have things, including the Thing that the Woodenton Jews are avoiding—namely Judaism—and cannot see that a loss of intangibles could be the real problem.

To be a Jew is to have trinkets and skull caps to the Woodenton Jews, but Tzuref has to finally force Eli to see the truth of what happened to the greenie and others. This is when Roth drops the hammer on the Woodenton Jews and, by extension, his readers:

"But I tell you he has nothing. *Nothing*. You have that word in English? *Nicht? Gornisht?*"

"Yes, Mr. Tzuref, we have the word."

"A mother and a father?" Tzuref said. "No. A wife? No. A baby? A little ten-month-old baby? No! A village full of friends? A synagogue where you knew the feel of every seat under your pants? Where with your eyes closed you could smell the cloth of the Torah...And a medical experiment they performed on him yet! That leaves nothing, Mr. Peck. Absolutely nothing!"<sup>50</sup>

The greenie has not only lost things, he has lost his entire family, and even, it is implied, been castrated. He has no things, and now Eli wants to take his last Thing by forcing assimilation on him. To the greenie Judaism is not a Thing, it is all he has left, and Eli wants to take even that from him.

Neither Eli nor Roth's readers can hide from the truth of Tzuref's admonishment, and yet Eli has nevertheless become fixated on the idea that the clothes make the man.

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<sup>49</sup> Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic," 263.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 264.

This is the same statement we will see from Allen shortly: American Jews have become hopelessly materialistic; they think that having more stuff, or the right stuff, can make everything better. The real juxtaposition here is that actual things, to Eli, are not Things because they can change your life, which means they are objects with use. Physical items are being privileged above a religion-Thing in a way that can only be read as critical. Eli goes home and takes one of his own suits, his nice green one, and boxes it up with a note explaining the clothes are for the “gentleman in the hat” and goes on to claim the he is “not a Nazi who would drive eighteen children, who are probably frightened at the sight of a firefly, into homelessness.”<sup>51</sup>

What transpires next results in Eli being forced to abandon his identity as a comfortable, assimilated Jew. Eli finds his box returned to him, but it no longer contains Eli’s good, green suit. It now contains the greenie’s black gabardine and black hat. Eli offered the greenie a suit, and the greenie reciprocated. The surface meaning would seem to be one of cultural miscommunication and the greenie not understanding that a return gift was not required. Eli’s reaction to the gift, however, further demonstrates the way that the things in this story are not Things at all, and are in fact the most powerful objects of all. Eli decides to put on the black suit; to see what it feels like. “The shock, at first, was the shock of having daylight turned off all at once. Inside the box was an eclipse...For the first time in his life he *smelled* the color of blackness: a little stale, a little sour, a little old...”<sup>52</sup> The metaphor of blackness and invisibility is inverted, in a sense. Normally black would be aligned with invisible, but in this case the utter blackness of the suit is what makes it so visible, so Other. Eli perceives that blackness in a kind of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 285.

synesthetic way as he mentally struggles with what it means to be visibly Jewish and if that is something that a modern Jew can allow themselves to be.

Eli starts with the hat, then the man's fringed undergarment, which Eli does not even recognize; he calls it "a little fringed serape."<sup>53</sup> Allen Cooper thinks Eli's ignorance of some of these items may be a willful defense mechanism because, "Eli, educated professional...must know something, however rudimentary, about the forms of his religion, but has joined these suburban Jews in escaping far from their roots."<sup>54</sup> To Cooper's mind Eli has willfully made Judaism so thoroughly a Thing that he cannot even recall that he once knew what these ritual clothes were. He puts on the jacket, trousers, and vest. When it comes time to look for the socks he discovers "a khaki army sock" in each trouser pocket. "As he slipped them over his toes, he invented a genesis: a G.I.'s present in 1945. Plus everything else lost between 1938 and 1945, he has also lost his socks. Not that he had lost the socks, but that he's had to stoop to accepting these, made Eli almost cry."<sup>55</sup> Again we see Eli missing the forest for the trees. The true enormity of what has been taken from the greenie, and the reality of what it means that Eli is trying to force him to assimilate, do not affect him like a physical object such as a sock does.

Eli, now fully dressed, steps boldly out into public view. When a neighbor sees him he immediately flees back into his house. When his phone begins to ring he imagines the conversation with the neighbor: "Eli, there's a Jew at your door."<sup>56</sup> Though Roth has been hinting at this issue of identity throughout the story, here it is finally articulated; you

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>54</sup> Allen Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 39.

<sup>55</sup> Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic," 287.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

can be a real Jew if you choose, but you cannot do it in Woodenton. Gittleman argued that, “once [Eli] understood the nature of the Jew as survivor, it became a matter of life and death to look like a Jew, *and to make certain he was recognized as a Jew*, particularly by his gentile neighbors.”<sup>57</sup>

Only a man wearing that suit is a Jew. When Eli puts it on, he becomes a Jew at the door. So if the greenie is no longer wearing it, what is he? If Judaism is a Thing, what is the role of the things of Judaism? For Eli Judaism has been a Thing at least as long as he has been in Woodenton; it is not only an object without use, but it is an object it is dangerous to be caught with. The greenie lives in a world in which Judaism is still an object with use, so for him the taking off of one suit and the donning of another does not change his Jewish identity. But for Eli the use of Jewish ritual objects and traditional clothing for the first time causes a quantum rupture in his sense of self. The objects of Judaism clearly have their own transformative power, even in a place like Woodenton where they have been set aside as Things, and dangerous.

Sanford Pinsker, one of the most well-known critics of Jewish American literature, sees this clothing swap as a paradigm shift. Pinsker argues that “Eli not only exchanges his contemporary refinements for the mantle of history, but, more importantly, he assumes the psychic identity of his alter ego.”<sup>58</sup> The description of the greenie as Eli’s “alter ego” belies the separation Eli and the Jews of Woodenton want to imagine. They believe that they have done away with the archaic forms of Judaism, or even that it is possible to abandon the Judaism-Thing. The relationship between Eli and the greenie,

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<sup>57</sup> Gittleman, “The Pecks of Woodenton, Long Island, Thirty Years Later,” 142.

<sup>58</sup> Sanford Pinsker, *The Comedy that “Hoits”*: *An Essay on the Fiction of Philip Roth* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1975), 23.

however, demonstrates that the entire process of Thing-making may be a lie assimilated Jews tell themselves to hide from the truth that they are all still greenhorns underneath their American costumes.

As with any good superhero, Eli decides that once he has transformed from mild-mannered Eli into Jewish Eli he is meant to present himself to the town dressed in the black (visible) suit. According to Joseph Landis, “Eli and the Jews of Woodenton must accept the heritage of faith and martyrdom that is symbolized by the suit.”<sup>59</sup> As he does so, his neighbors immediately assume Eli is having a nervous breakdown. “Shortly, everybody in Coach House Road was aware that Eli Peck...was having a breakdown. Everybody except Eli Peck. He knew that what he did was not insane, though he felt every inch of its strangeness.”<sup>60</sup> Eli is, perhaps, accessing some primal, Jungian, forgotten part of himself; some part that has been tamped down so tightly over the generations that the other Jews of Woodenton do not even recognize it as a part of themselves anymore. Gittleman argued that, “only Eli understood what has happened. His transformation into an East European Hassidic survivor of Hitler’s slaughter, has given new strength to the cloth which binds Jew to Jew.”<sup>61</sup> How far down the rabbit hole of assimilation have the Jews of Woodenton fallen if Eli’s decision to be seen as a Jew in public is immediately assumed to be acute mental illness? This is Roth’s driving point—is there room for Judaism in the life of American Jews, or can we only see it as some-Thing performed by those from the Old World and the mentally ill?

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<sup>59</sup> Landis, Joseph. “The Sadness of Philip Roth: An Interim Report,” *Massachusetts Review* 3, no. 2 (1962): 265.

<sup>60</sup> Roth, “Eli, the Fanatic,” 293.

<sup>61</sup> Gittleman, “The Pecks of Woodenton, Long Island, Thirty Years Later,” 141.

Roth's final meaning is no clearer than was Englander's. There is no clear consensus on how to place "Eli" in relation to the rest of Roth's canon. Gittleman, for example, was revisiting "Eli" thirty years after its publication so clearly he feels it is one of Roth's more important works and his analysis shows that he saw a great deal of meaning in Eli's sartorial protest. Allen Guttman, on the other hand, as has been noted, rejects the notion that there is such a thing as "Jewish humor" so he sees Eli's story as "truly a tragedy" and not the black comedy other scholars identified.<sup>62</sup>

Eli ultimately finds neither redemption, expiation, nor peace. He goes to the hospital to see his wife and newborn son, and all his community can say is, "Oh, Christ... You don't have this Bible stuff on the brain..."<sup>63</sup> Even the phrase "Bible stuff" underscores how Thingish Judaism and Jewish practices are to the rest of the Woodenton Jews. They begin to speak to him like a child, they patronize him, and they mock him by saying, "Excuse me, rabbi, but you're wanted... in the temple."<sup>64</sup> They cannot believe that a previously "normal" young man would suddenly be parading about in religious garb unless he had gone completely round the bend, so despite Eli's screaming protest that, "*I'm the father!*" they subdue and medicate him. The story ends with the ominous statements that, "in a moment they tore off his jacket—it gave so easily, in one yank. Then a needle slid under his skin. The drug calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached."<sup>65</sup> The blackness of Jewish visibility has altered Eli's very soul and Eli has been changed, but is it for the good? What will happen when he

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<sup>62</sup> Mintz, "Devil and Angel," 163.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



wakes up? Will he admit it was all a mental breakdown and go back to being an assimilated persecutor of DPs, or will he pack his family up and move back to the city? Probably neither, but regardless it is not Roth's way to tie things up with a bow at the end of the story.

But one message is clear. In 1948, in the bucolic suburbs, there is no place for "Bible stuff," whether in the person of the more religiously traditional war refugees or of a neighbor they have known and respected for years. A threat is a threat, and the community will close ranks to eliminate the threat like white blood cells surrounding a foreign body. It is interesting to note that at no point in the story do we hear anything from the non-Jews of Woodenton. We are told a bit about them in one of Eli's letters to Tzuref, "Woodenton, as you may not know, has long been the home of well-to-do Protestants. It is only since the war that Jews have been able to buy property here, and for the Jews and Gentiles to live beside each other in amity. For this adjustment to be made, both Jews and Gentiles alike had to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other."<sup>66</sup>

This is another one of Roth's sharper barbs towards assimilated American Jews. He is calling them, in effect, paranoid and possibly delusional. It is difficult to imagine what the "extreme practices" of an affluent, suburban, community would look like. Perhaps, as Eileen Watts argues, the Protestants "have adjusted by not restricting so many of their country clubs, neighborhoods, and universities, and Jews have adjusted by not dressing or speaking so much like Jews."<sup>67</sup> So it seems as though the Jews of Woodenton were most likely sacrificing much more than their Protestant neighbors. Will Herberg

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>67</sup> Watts, "Jewish Self-Hatred in Malamud's 'The Jewbird'," 163.

calls these, “Defense activities,” and argues that Jews, as the most vulnerable of the major American religious communities, have the “most elaborately developed...strategy of minority-group defensiveness.”<sup>68</sup> Because of their fear of both anti-Semitism and “intrusion” of the church many Jews fought hard for a total secularization of community life and a solid wall between personal religious practice and public performance of Americanness. Dan Isaac said that Roth’s criticism is that, “Judaism has gone through the quiet metamorphosis demanded by American society and emerged as a co-operative, acquisitive member of the new frontier. That [some people] resent this indictment is understandable; but to attack the critic rather than to face the criticism is unforgivable.”<sup>69</sup> And moreover, this may all be a self-imposed sacrifice. The opinion of these Protestants about the yeshiva is never actually mentioned; if they have even noticed its presence they do not seem to have worried about it much. The Jews of Woodenton, however, feel the need to take decisive, prophylactic action to ensure that their neighbors are not reminded of the “extreme practices” of the Jews. It seems to beg the question, “Why aren’t there pogroms in Woodenton? Because the Jews use ‘common sense’ and ‘moderation’ to gauge their public behavior.”<sup>70</sup> In essence, the Jews of Woodenton preemptively blame the victims. They feel they must not provoke their gentile neighbors, and if those neighbors were to respond to a provocation with violence, well, it would be the Jews’ own fault for not keeping up their end of the bargain.

James Durban sees “Eli” as being analogous to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil” in that each shows “the embarrassment of either Protestants or

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<sup>68</sup> Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 238.

<sup>69</sup> Isaac, “In Defense of Philip Roth,” 96.

<sup>70</sup> Andrew Furman, “The Ineluctable Holocaust in the Fiction of Philip Roth,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 12, *The Changing Mosaic: From Cahan to Malamud, Roth and Ozick* (1993): 110.

Jews who feel that they have outgrown fanatical expressions of faith.”<sup>71</sup> That word “outgrown” really mirrors the way so much of the third generation literature treats Judaism; it is really something vestigial that properly, *naturally* will be abandoned and set aside. Nothing seems to bother Roth more than inaction, which is why Eli becomes, in the end, an almost unstoppable force. Roth fights, according to Joseph Landis, “against those who deny life, against the cowards who fear it, against all who would reduce it to safe insignificance, against all who flee from self and suffering.”<sup>72</sup>

Roth is satirizing the complacency and conformism of post-War suburban Jews, and showing them the potentially eruptive repercussions of their willingness to, in essence, sell their souls for a piece of real estate—the ultimate not-a-Thing thing—in a desirable zip code. “The story ‘Eli, the Fanatic’” Michael Rockland argued, “is an attack on suburban Jewry and their values.”<sup>73</sup> Roth sees in the lifestyle of the Woodenton Jews a “danger in American affluence for the Jew, and the threat to his identity.”<sup>74</sup> Dan Isaac thinks that for Roth, “American Judaism has become the willing servant of an immoral society, corrupted by the very force it should oppose.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, James Durban points out that through the use of the war refugees Roth is also targeting “suburban evasion of Holocaust ruthlessness.”<sup>76</sup> Lawrence Mintz argued that Roth is just as critical of the falseness of upwardly-mobile white collar Jews as was Woody Allen in his lampoon of the Noted Scholar, “like Woody Allen, Roth is as contemptuous of the

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<sup>71</sup> Durban, “Being Jewish in the Twentieth Century,” 2.

<sup>72</sup> Landis, “The Sadness of Philip Roth,” 261.

<sup>73</sup> Rockland, “The Jewish Side of Philip Roth,” 33.

<sup>74</sup> Gittleman, “The Pecks of Woodenton, Long Island, Thirty Years Later,” 142.

<sup>75</sup> Isaac, “In Defense of Philip Roth,” 94.

<sup>76</sup> Durban, “Being Jewish in the Twentieth Century,” 7.

learned as he is of the ignorant, and we are not to mistake his satire against the bourgeoisie as a defense of bohemia.”<sup>77</sup> Roth is not a hippie or anti-establishment militant; he simply despises inauthenticity and has what David Brauner calls a, “preoccupation with questions of authentic Jewishness.”<sup>78</sup> This insecurity undergirds the entire story. “In a sense,” writes Timothy Parrish, “the yeshiva Jews are ‘authentic’ Jews, and their authenticity terrifies the suburban Jews whose success depends in part on their belief that their fellow Americans no longer perceive them as Jews. In other words, the story...highlights both the Woodenton Jews’ sense of their own cultural inferiority and their displaced identification with the Christians whom they live near but do not really know.”<sup>79</sup>

What makes “Eli” an integral part of Roth’s larger corpus is what Sylvia Fishman calls his “presentation of Jewish identities, articulating a multiplicity of voices in the complex political and philosophical twisting and turnings of [the] contemporary Diaspora.”<sup>80</sup> Roth himself has fought back against his critics who he feels believe only positive portrayals of Jews should be published. He has argued that that sort of myopia only compounds the problem, “when a willful blindness to man’s condition can only precipitate further anguishes and miseries....I cannot help but believe that there is a higher moral purpose for the Jewish writer, and the Jewish people, than the improvement of public relations.”<sup>81</sup> Michael Rockland puts it even more clearly, “The best Jew, Roth

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<sup>77</sup> Mintz, “Devil and Angel,” 162.

<sup>78</sup> Brauner, “Fiction as Self-Accusation,” 9.

<sup>79</sup> Timothy Parrish, “A Comic Crisis of Faith,” *Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer*, ed. Ben Siegel and Jay L. Halio (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>80</sup> Fishman, “Success in Circuit Lies,” 151.

<sup>81</sup> Roth, “Some New Jewish Stereotypes,” 10.

feels these critics of his are arguing, is the invisible Jew.”<sup>82</sup> Eli, at the end of the story, becomes the exact opposite of the invisible Jew; he becomes so visible he cannot be ignored, which means he has to be attacked. As I will now explain in the next section, Bernard Malamud also dealt with the psychological and real violence that can arise when assimilated Jews feel their place in society is being threatened by “real” or traditional Jews. Despite his reputation for depicting Jews in the 1960s and 70s being much better than Roth’s his exploration of inter-Jewish conflict actually ends even more disturbingly than does “Eli.”

### **The Jewbird**

Bernard Malamud is both easier and more difficult to contextualize than Roth. Because he has not faced the same accusations of being self-loathing or bad for the Jews less work needs has needed to be done in rehabilitating his image, and therefore there are fewer contemporary analyses of his work. His career also mirrored Heller’s in many ways in that his first novel, *The Natural* was not at all Jewish, and it was only as his career progressed that he began to write Jewish characters or engage with themes of Jewish identity. In this section I will use Malamud’s work to support the claims I am making about the third generation, and to show that Roth was not the only person who was writing fiction criticizing the relationship between assimilated Jews and DPs.

Malamud’s “The Jewbird” first appeared in *The Reporter* in April of 1963, before it was anthologized later that year in his second short story collection *Idiots First*. But although Malamud felt strongly about the story, literary critics, it seems, did not. This is

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<sup>82</sup> Rockland, “The Jewish Side of Philip Roth,” 36.

relevant because it may explain why Roth's take on this inter-Jewish relationship received so much more attention, even though the ending of Malamud's story seems much more accusative than Roth's. Almost none of the reviews of "The Jewbird" seemed to recognize the story as having any real satiric weight or being a particularly interesting take on the relationship between assimilated American Jews and the traditional Judaism-as-Thing. The initial publication in *The Reporter* created no real interest at all, and when the reviews of *Idiots First* began to come in "The Jewbird" was only occasionally singled out. Furthermore, not all of that singling out was positive. One review, for example, said that "because of an occasional inconsistency in time or genre, such stories as 'The Jewbird'...fail to achieve their proper impact."<sup>83</sup> Alone, apparently, "The Jewbird" escapes notice and in collection it suffers in proximity to stories such as "Black is My Favorite Color" or "The German Refugee" which received much more universal acclaim. Another review called it "too facile a parable about anti-Semitism."<sup>84</sup> The author of perhaps the most scathing response said of *all* the stories in the collection that they are "full of stereotyped characters, and the plots lack dramatic intensity."<sup>85</sup>

But, as often happens with art, time and distance can increase an appreciation for a work. This seems to have happened with "The Jewbird" as the years passed, and increasingly people have written about it more positively.<sup>86</sup> As time passed "The

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<sup>83</sup> Joel Salzberg, *Bernard Malamud: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1985), 25, no. 17.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, no. 31.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, no. 19.

<sup>86</sup> Data is, of course, always in the interpretation. Though it is very true that almost all of the negative responses to "The Jewbird" were published in the first 18 months after the publication of *Idiots First*, it is difficult to imagine why someone writing many years later would make reference to a story they did not like. Only scholars who are using "The Jewbird" for some reason would have reason to discuss it, and because they are using it they obviously feel it has some utility. So a lack of negative response cannot actually be seen as indicative of a shift in the treatment of the story. However, the sheer number of positive

Jewbird” even became, for some respondents, emblematic of Malamud’s entire literary project. “The Jewbird” presents “a striking illustration of the baneful world that Malamud projects.”<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, much like Roth’s “Eli,” “The Jewbird” does not dominate Malamud scholarship. There are no books about it, and very few articles devoted to it alone. It is considered a bit of a Malamud outlier; in a career not thought to be too strongly associated with issues of identity, in “The Jewbird,” “this positive stress upon Jewish identity is a marked exception to Malamud’s usual orientation.”<sup>88</sup> More often than not it is included in a larger discussion of Malamud’s work and singled out for some aspect or another. The aspects of it most often singled out, however, are its fantastical nature and its strong condemnation of Jewish self-hatred, both of which show Malamud to be presenting the same image of Judaism-as-Thing that Roth did.

The story itself is fairly short; only nine columns in the original *The Reporter* publication. It is told in a third-person, limited omniscience style with the short sentences more commonly associated with Hemmingway than with Malamud. “The Jewbird” is, on the surface, the story of a talking bird who takes refuge in the apartment of the Cohen family near Manhattan’s Lower East side. Both the location of the apartment—the neighborhood most associated with the Eastern European Jewish migration, nor the name of the family—Cohen, denoting ancient status as a part of the Cohanim, or priestly class, lead the reader to think about the process of assimilation and how many things must be thrown off in order to fully assimilate. Eileen Watts writes that, “Cohen is a more or less

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applications of the story as compared to the sheer number of positive mentions of it in the initial flurry of reviews, I think, can be said to indicate a shift in the appreciation and application of the story to larger ideas.

<sup>87</sup> Samuel Bellman, “Women, Children, and Idiots First,” in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, ed. Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 20.

<sup>88</sup> Abramson, “Bernard Malamud and the Jews,” 155.

assimilated immigrant, living in a penthouse apartment, but an apartment nonetheless—a modern ghetto—receiving a newly arrived immigrant...as shabbily as his immigrant parents were no doubt received in this country.”<sup>89</sup> The Jewbird calls himself Schwartz (Yiddish for black) and tells the Cohens he is fleeing the “anti-semeets” who have been pursuing him. He hopes for shelter and respite in the Cohen home, but finds only more persecution. It is, much like “Eli,” about what J. Gerald Kennedy calls, “the Jew’s complicated and sometimes scornful attitude about his own cultural roots.”<sup>90</sup> The name, “Schwartz,” could be a sign that Malamud is using the same blackness/invisibility metaphor Roth used, but Malamud’s primary expression of Jewish identity seems to be humanity/inhumanity or humanity/animality. Either we recognize the humanity in the Other, or else we are casting them as animals (and animals can easily be Things), which results in a superior-inferior dynamic that can perhaps only end in tragedy.

The difference between Schwartz and the Cohens is quite stark. The Cohens are an assimilated, working-class family living what appears to be an only nominally Jewish lifestyle. Schwartz, on the other hand, is depicted as “hoarse,” “bedraggled,” “ruffled,” and “dull”; he speaks “in Jewish,” and is heard to sprinkle Yiddish into his conversation and use traditionally Yiddish rhythms and word inversions while the Cohen family all speak colloquial English. He *davens* and prays “with great passion” while Mr. Cohen refers to him as “a foxy bastard [who] thinks he’s a Jew” and a “goddamn pest and a freeloader.” Harry Cohen objects to Schwartz’s smell, his snoring, his diet, and

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<sup>89</sup> Watts, “Jewish Self-Hatred in Malamud’s ‘The Jewbird,’” 159. Watts calls Cohen an immigrant, but I believe she misspoke here. Cohen seems to be very clearly to be a second if not third generation American.

<sup>90</sup> J. Gerald Kennedy, “Parody as Exorcism: ‘The Raven’ and ‘The Jewbird,’” *Genre* 13 (1980): 164.



eventually his very presence. Schwartz is clearly an allegorical figure, but it remains vague what specifically he stands for.<sup>91</sup> It is obvious that there is, as in “Eli,” a moral about inter-Jewish relationships and identity, but there are other aspects of Schwartz that could be said to represent various other groups. His quest for “simple pleasures (a bit of herring, the Jewish paper) are characteristic of old people” for example.<sup>92</sup> Alternatively, “through his sufferance and survival, Malamud’s absurd bird becomes a symbol of the strength of the tragic clown.”<sup>93</sup> Robert Solotaroff called Schwartz “just somebody’s cranky, sly, Old World Jewish uncle who moves into crowded quarters for a while and who, at his advanced age, likes ‘the warm, the windows, the smell of cooking...to see once in a while the *Jewish Morning Journal* and have now and then a schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God.”<sup>94</sup> In both Roth and Malamud the “Old World” Jew is very nearly a Thing himself. He is out of place in our modern, assimilated world. He is not wanted, and more than that he is a threat to the hard-won status quo. Schwartz is a Jew-animal-Thing closely related to Roth’s greenie-Thing in his out-of-placeness and his ability to cause harm.

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<sup>91</sup> It should be noted that there is a school of thought which treats “The Jewbird” as a parody of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven.” While I do see some of the similarities between the two, I do not hold with the idea that one is directly related to the other, particularly since Malamud himself claimed the story was inspired by Howard Nemerov’s “Digressions Around a Crow. “I said to myself, thinking of a jewfish, suppose the bird had been Jewish. At that point the story came to life.” It would be difficult to argue that there is such a thing as “accidental parody,” so if Malamud is not crediting Poe for the genesis of the story it seems unwise to ascribe an inspiration to it after the fact. C.f. J. Gerald Kennedy “Parody as Exorcism; ‘The Raven’ and ‘The Jewbird’” or Philip Hanson “Horror and Ethnic Identity in ‘The Jewbird’” for a more complete description of the perceived parodic nature of “The Jewbird.”

<sup>92</sup> Marc L. Ratner, “Style and Humanity in Malamud’s Fiction,” *The Massachusetts Review* 5, no. 4 (1964): 679.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Solotaroff, *Bernard Malamud: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 78.

From the beginning Malamud, through Schwartz, hints at the potential violence brewing in the interactions between the Cohens and Schwartz. Harry Cohen takes a swipe at Schwartz when he “wearily flapped through the open kitchen window” and landed on their dinner table.<sup>95</sup> The bird then speaks for the first time by exclaiming: “‘Gevalt, a pogrom!’”<sup>96</sup> Those three words establish a disproportionate amount of information about how Malamud wants the reader to see Schwartz. First: “gevalt.” Gevalt is a Yiddish word without a direct translation into English. It is an expression of dismay, less well known than the more common “oy vey.” Oy vey translates reasonably closely as “oh woe,” so it would be fair to say that “oy gevalt” is a slightly stronger exclamation; rather than expression sadness or general malaise it expresses a sharp shock, fear, or even disgust. So Schwartz uses not only a Yiddish word, but a second-order Yiddish word which marks him as fairly versant with the language; certainly more so than the average English-speaking American.<sup>97</sup> Secondly he says “a pogrom!” This narrows his origins down geographically. Pogroms were a form of anti-Jewish violence primarily associated with pre-Soviet Russia and the countries that were under Russian control. So Schwarz is a Yiddish-aware bird most likely from the area of Russia, Poland, or Lithuania. The greenie in “Eli” has a much more specific backstory; he is a victim of the Nazis, and a Holocaust survivor. Schwartz is more of an Old World EveryJew; he is not fleeing a specific time or

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<sup>95</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” in *Wandering Stars*, ed. Jack Dann (New York: Pocket Books, 1975) 136.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> I am calling words like “oy vey,” “schmutz,” “schlep,” “klutz,” “glitch,” or “maven” first-order Yiddish words in that they are words that many if not most Americans use in conversation, some of which, like “klutz” or “glitch” are no longer even recognized as being originally foreign words at all. Second-order, then, includes words like “gevalt,” “bupkis,” “goniff,” “boychik,” “meeskeit,” “meshuggeneh,” etc. These are still sometimes used by non-Jews, but primarily in areas with an historically large Jewish community. Third-order would involve some level of basic literacy or competency with Yiddish, including being able to formulate or understand whole sentences.

place or persecution, and therefore he can stand in for the ways assimilated American Jews have felt about and treated their Old World counterparts for a century. “The Jewbird” is not just about post-Holocaust inter-Jewish relations, it is about the disdain American Jews have shown for Eastern European Jews for a very long time.

Literary critic Harold Bloom wrote of Malamud that, “alone among American writers he has fixed on the Jew as representative man—and on the schlemiel as representative Jew. His Jewish Everyman is an isolated, displaced loner, American in Italy, Easterner in the West, German refugee in America, bird among bipeds.”<sup>98</sup> Bloom identifies Schwartz as the representative Jew in the story, not the Cohens. But he is representative because he is alone and unwanted. According to Bloom the relationship between the assimilated American Cohen and the displaced Schwartz is what *makes* him a Jew in Malamudian terms, because if he were accepted he would no longer be the schlemiel ideal. To extend Bloom’s argument a step further, the process of Thing-making grants a form of legitimacy through the very attempt at delegitimizing. Cohen wants to erase Schwartz just as Woodenton wanted to erase the yeshiva. But in both cases instead of erasing them they actually made them even more of an exemplar of Jewishness than they were before.

Schwartz is seeking food and rest, but Cohen is immediately suspicious of the bird’s intentions. When Cohen asks him “what do you want” Schwartz responds that he would like ““a piece of herring with a crust of bread. You can’t live on nerve forever.””<sup>99</sup> Schwartz is only concerned with the immediate; he is hungry and tired in this moment,

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<sup>98</sup> Ruth Wisse, “Requiem for the Schlemiel,” in *Bernard Malamud Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 161.

<sup>99</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 137.

and that is as far as his thinking has gone. Cohen, however, is more concerned with Schwartz's long-term plans. He responds "all I'm asking is, what brings you to this address?"<sup>100</sup> Why here? Why now? Why us? Why has Schwartz singled out the Cohen family? To Schwartz there is no reason: "the window was open" he tells them, and the narrator tells us at the outset of the story: "That's how it goes. It's open, you're in. Closed, you're out and that's your fate."<sup>101</sup> Schwartz thinks he just got lucky; in fleeing from the "anti-Semeets...eagles, vultures, and hawks. And once in a while...crows" he happened to find an open window.<sup>102</sup> It was not his fate to die, not today. To Cohen, on the other hand, Schwartz's very presence is a kind of persecution or oppression, furthering the idea that traditional Jews themselves are Things when they upset the balance of an assimilated Jew's life. Cohen just wants to go about his life and not be bothered by the needs of an indigent, Yiddish-speaking, beleaguered houseguest.

Cohen seems to mistrust Schwartz and is suspicious that he even is what he claims to be. Cohen first accuses him of being "some kind of ghost or dybbuk," which Schwartz dismisses—although, "in a sense, Schwartz does possess the Cohen family"—but does acknowledge that he had a relative who had been possessed by a dybbuk, a malevolent dead spirit from Yiddish folklore.<sup>103</sup> The tone of the conversation indicates that Cohen does not really believe in such things and was only trying to dislodge this unwanted visitor.<sup>104</sup> Schwartz, on the other hand, takes it as a matter of fact that dybbuks

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Philip Hanson, "Horror and Ethnic Identity in 'The Jewbird,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 3, no. 3 (1993): 363.

<sup>104</sup> Malamud, "The Jewbird," 137.

do, in fact, exist but simply refutes the idea that he is under the control of one. Again, the subtext of the conversation shows the deep cultural differences between Schwartz and Cohen. Mrs. Cohen seems to have slightly more fanciful notions than her husband; even after Schwartz has denied being a dybbuk (but really, if *A Serious Man* taught us anything it is that no self-respecting dybbuk would admit to being one) she suggests he could be ““an old Jew changed into a bird by somebody.””<sup>105</sup> There are layers within layers here; if an old Jew is a Thing and a bird is a Thing, is an old Jew who has been turned into a bird doubly a Thing? Is he reclaimed from being a Thing by the double negative? Schwartz was a bit more sanguine about the potential of his being transformed, responding ““who knows? Does God tell us everything?””<sup>106</sup>

There is a piety to his response that is entirely lacking in the Cohens, and his attitude seems to “imply that God bears some of the responsibility for the unfortunate situation into which [he] has been thrust.””<sup>107</sup> Cohen is the primary force within his home; he directs what his wife and son do and (he hopes) think. Schwartz is willing to shrug some things off and chalk them up to a higher power about which he cannot know. That unknowability, however, does not frighten or unsettle Schwartz as it seems to do to Cohen. Here, as in the end of “Eli,” we see the discomfort of Americanized Jews with traditional forms of religion; in “Eli” it was the “Bible stuff,” here it is a belief in God and spirits, but in both cases the author is focusing on the American rejection of Jewish (Thingish) religiosity.

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<sup>105</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 138.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Neil Rudin, “Malamud’s Jewbird and Kafka’s Gracchus: Birds of a Feather,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 1, no. 1 (1975): 11.

Cohen continues to try to eject Schwartz from his home. He wants his wife to feed Schwartz outside, however, ““after that, take off”” he insists.<sup>108</sup> This is where Schwartz’s true situation emerges. ““I’m tired,”” he tells Cohen, ““and it’s a long way.’ ‘Which direction are you headed, north or south?’ Schwartz, barely lifting his wings, shrugged. ‘You don’t know where you’re going?’ ‘Where there’s charity, I’ll go.’”<sup>109</sup> He is, “an exemplary image of the Malamudian victim...constantly pursued by anti-Semites and fate...opportunist and saint who tests...the humanity and compassion of others.”<sup>110</sup> Schwartz has no home and he has no destination; he is truly a wandering Aramean; what Neil Rudin calls “the Wandering Jew who can find no resting place.”<sup>111</sup> Like the greenie in Woodenton, Schwartz has nothing and no one, and the American cousins he thought would be welcoming and supporting are turning out to be just as cold and dismissive as those from whom he is fleeing. Cohen relents to allow Schwartz to stay the night, but when he tries to evict him the next morning his son, Maurie, cries and Cohen is forced to relent and allow Schwartz to stay longer-term. He makes his disapproval clear, however, and tells his wife, ““I’m dead set against it. I warn you he ain’t gonna stay here long.””<sup>112</sup>

It is at this point that Cohen’s “self-loathing” really becomes manifest. His wife wonders aloud what he has against the “poor bird” to which Cohen responds, ““Poor bird, my ass. He’s a foxy bastard. He thinks he’s a Jew.””<sup>113</sup> Whether Malamud intended it or not, the use of the word “foxy” hearkens directly back to medieval European anti-

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<sup>108</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 34.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Sidney Richman, *Bernard Malamud* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 126.

<sup>111</sup> Rudin, “Malamud’s Jewbird and Kafka’s Gracchus,” 10.

<sup>112</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 139.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

Judaism where Jews were traditionally depicted as sly, cunning, conniving, dishonest, and untrustworthy. It is also apparent that whatever Cohen considers to be a “true” Jew, it does not include traditional prayer, *davening*, Yiddish, or superstitious beliefs in dybbuks or God. Being a Jew, to Cohen, means being assimilated, rational, secular, and forward-thinking. This is the Thing-making of the Old World Jew; all of his beliefs and practices are anachronistic or out of place, and they therefore do not matter. Having an outdated attachment to Jewish religious practices renders you not-a-Jew. In much the same way Eli reduces the greenie to his clothes, Cohen reduces Schwartz to his beliefs. You hold on to a Thing, it makes you into a Thing. Cohen continues his polemic against Schwartz: “‘A Jewbird, what a chutzpah. One false move and he’s out on his drumsticks.’”<sup>114</sup> Interesting here in addition to Cohen’s continued invective against Schwartz is that he tries to use a Yiddish word for the first time in the story. It is almost as though Schwartz’s presence is forcing Cohen to try for some imagined authenticity in his own Jewishness, but he is failing; it is unnatural to him and he uses “chutzpah” incorrectly.<sup>115</sup> Cohen’s major blow up comes when Schwartz refuses the dried corn Cohen has brought home for him: “Cohen was annoyed. What’s the matter, Cross-eyes, is your life getting too good for you? Are you forgetting what it means to be migratory? I’ll bet a helluva lot of crows you happen to be acquainted with, Jews or otherwise, would give their eyeteeth to eat this corn.”<sup>116</sup> “Migratory” is obviously a euphemism for “Jewish” here. Cohen, the assimilated Jew is actually using assimilation as a weapon against Schwartz. If Cohen

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Chutzpah is, of course, a noun, but it is an abstract noun best translated as “guts,” or “nerve,” it does not, therefore, get an indefinite article before it. “The chutzpah” could work, but “a chutzpah” could not.

<sup>116</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 139.

assimilated it is because he is a modern American, but if Schwartz is becoming bourgeoisie in his tastes it indicates a character flaw. One hallmark of a Thing is that, as it has no purpose, it also does not evolve or change. So because Cohen views Schwartz (and by extension all Old World Jews) as a Thing he is not allowed the same right to adapt to his surroundings that Cohen takes for granted for himself and his family.

Cohen is expressing a sentiment similar to that of the Jews of Woodenton. As Eileen Watts puts it, “Cohen articulated an unexpressed feeling in this country about immigrants: you’re lucky to be here; be happy with what little you have.”<sup>117</sup> The established Jews do not understand why these immigrant-types, who seem to have it so good, cannot just adjust and behave the way their American counter-parts think they should. Toss your Judaism up on a shelf like everyone else and appreciate your new life. From Cohen’s point of view Schwartz is abusing his hospitality and should remember his place. He is starting to act like “one of us,” and it is very important to Cohen that he remain “one of them,” which is hypocritical on Cohen’s part and shows that there really is not a way the Old World immigrant can win in this scenario. Schwartz is permanently and physically marked as “other;” he is, after all, a talking bird before you even get to his alleged religious affiliation. As such it is, to Cohen, a reflection on all American Jews if one who is so radically other begins to act as though he is one of them. This is the fear in Woodenton as well; if the Protestants of Woodenton see this Yeshiva with their Old Country ways and accents being accepted by the Jews of Woodenton they may assume that they are the same. There is an impossible push-pull being enacted on the outsider Jew in which he (in these cases) must simultaneously act American so as not to

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<sup>117</sup> Watts, “Jewish Self-Hatred in Malamud’s ‘The Jewbird’,” 160.



embarrass to assimilated Jews, but remain distant so as not to implicate the assimilated Jews.

Schwartz, eventually, made the mistake of trying to speak realistically about Maurie's limitations and told Cohen, "'he's a good boy—you don't have to worry. He won't be a shicker or a wife beater, God forbid, but a scholar he'll never be, if you know what I mean, although maybe a good mechanic. It's no disgrace in these times.'"<sup>118</sup> This truth-speech is the final crack in the fragile *détente* Cohen and Schwartz had built. Cohen tells him to keep his "'big snoot out of other people's private business,'" and returns to calling him "cross-eyes."<sup>119</sup> The "big snoot" comment, obviously, evokes the old canard of Jews having large noses, but this comparison also has a basis in reality. There are real birds with large beaks which have picked up common names such as "Jewbird" or "Jew crow," the southern ani and English chough, respectively.<sup>120</sup> Schwartz, wisely, tries to avoid Cohen but Cohen, when he could find Schwartz alone, would pick fights with him, often about Schwartz's hygiene. "'For Christ sake, why don't you wash yourself sometimes? Why must you always stink like a dead fish?'" Cohen asks Schwartz, out of the blue.<sup>121</sup> Schwartz prosaically responds that "'if someone eats garlic he will smell from garlic. I eat herring three times a day. Feed me flowers and I will smell like flowers.'"<sup>122</sup> Cohen, of course, points out that he does not have to feed Schwartz at all to which Schwartz responds: "'I'm not complaining...you're complaining.'"<sup>123</sup> Cohen then begins

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<sup>118</sup> Malamud, "The Jewbird," 140.

<sup>119</sup> Malamud, "The Jewbird," 141.

<sup>120</sup> Hanson, "Horror and Ethnic Identity in 'The Jewbird,'" 365.

<sup>121</sup> Malamud, "The Jewbird," 141.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

to berate the bird about his snoring, and calls him “a goddamn pest and free-loader” as well as a “goddamn devil” and a “bastard bird.”<sup>124</sup>

Just as the Jews of Woodenton were willing to expel their unwanted Jews, so is Cohen ready to expel Schwartz. “Why us?” they both seem to ask. Why should we be the ones responsible for these unwanted Jews? There is no sense of “he ain’t heavy, he’s my brother” amongst assimilated American Jews as far as Roth and Malamud are concerned. Schwartz, recognizing that he might not be able to avert expulsion this time, finally asks, “Mr. Cohen, why do you hate me so much... What did I do to you?”<sup>125</sup> Cohen is just as frank with Schwartz as he has been since their first meeting and tells Schwartz he is an “A number 1 troublemaker, that’s why. Now scat or it’s open war.”<sup>126</sup> The threat of violence, always in the background of the interactions between Cohen and Schwartz, has finally been articulated. Cohen continues to use vaguely anti-Jewish rhetoric, calling Schwartz a “troublemaker.” Jews were often accused of having divided loyalties, of being a “nation within a nation,” and being political dissidents and radicals.

Finally, as had to happen, the situation came to a head. Cohen’s mother died and Maurie came home from school the next day with a zero in arithmetic. Cohen flew into a rage, and as soon as his wife and son were out of the house he “openly attacked the bird.”<sup>127</sup> He chased Schwartz with a broom, and when the bird tried to hide in his birdhouse, “Cohen triumphantly reached in, and grabbing both skinny legs, dragged the bird out, cawing loudly...He whirled the bird around and around his head.”<sup>128</sup> Schwartz

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<sup>124</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 141-142.

<sup>125</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 143.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Malamud, “The Jewbird,” 144.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

managed to grab hold of Cohen's face and "hung on for dear life."<sup>129</sup> Cohen ripped the bird from his face, swung him around again, and then, "with a furious heave flung him into the night."<sup>130</sup> This is actually the only time we see Cohen perform a Jewish ritual; he is mimicking the Yom Kippur practice of *kapparot* in which Eastern European Jews swing a chicken around their heads to transfer their sins on to the bird. Schwartz has literally become a ritual object in this moment, so his humanity, animality, and Jewishness are all stripped away as he becomes a Thing of the Thing; lower even than the Thing itself are the items associated with the Thing. If we dehumanize those who may embarrass us or cause us to feel exposed and unnecessarily visible in society, what can we expect but that we treat them like animals onto whom we may place our communal sins and then sacrifice them for the good of the whole?

Cohen tosses the birdhouse and feeder after him and guards the balcony, broom in hand, for an hour waiting for Schwartz to return, "but the brokenhearted bird didn't."<sup>131</sup> Neither Mrs. Cohen nor Maurie question the situation, but both express quiet signs of grief for the loss of the bird. They were not strong enough to stand up for Schwartz, but they know enough to miss him now that he is gone. The end of the story is comparatively brief:

In the spring when the winter's snow had melted, the boy, moved by a memory, wandered in the neighborhood, looking for Schwartz. He found a dead black bird in a small lot near the river, his two wings broken, neck twisted, and both eyes plucked clean.

"Who did it to you, Mr. Schwartz?" Maurie wept.

"Anti-Semeets," Edie said later.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Malamud, "The Jewbird," 144.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

Whether Mrs. Cohen suspects her husband's role in Schwartz's demise is unclear.

Certainly Maurie does not recognize the violence his own father's attitude towards the bird had caused. The brevity of the story's final chapter keeps a sad event from becoming saccharine or maudlin. As Philip Hanson put it, "Even given the comic terms of 'The Jewbird,' Malamud is unwilling to sentimentalize Schwartz."<sup>133</sup>

There are several facets of traditional narrative of Jewish self-hatred that Malamud is addressing in this story. One is the previously discussed problems second and third generation American Jews had with the influx of displaced persons who flooded in during and after World War II. The large scale migration of Jews to the United States had stopped with the changes in immigration laws in the 1920s, so for many American Jews this was the first experience they had with the "huddled masses." Many Jewish authors have attacked the way in which the Jewish community responded to these displaced persons, perhaps none more scathingly than Roth in "Eli, the Fanatic," but Malamud's way of approaching the subject is both more oblique in the use of an animal analog, and more hopeless in the death of Schwartz at the end.<sup>134</sup>

It is unclear whether or not Cohen killed Schwartz. The twisted neck and broken wings certainly seem like results of Cohen's attack, but obviously Schwartz did manage to crawl away to the lot in which Maurie eventually found him. There is culpability

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<sup>133</sup> Hanson, "Horror and Ethnic Identity in 'The Jewbird,'" 362.

<sup>134</sup> Steven Kellman has a fascinating theory about the use of an animal protagonist in this story. He claims that although animals and humans are often equated in the Bible, in the present day there is a "marked discomfort of American Jews in the presence of living animals" ("Jews, Beasts, and Americans," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) 5, *The Varieties of Jewish Experience* [1986]: 5). American Jews have become so urbanized that they no longer even want to be around animals, much less consider themselves in any way equivalent to them. His claim is that an analysis of American Jewish literature shows that "well into the third generation, Jews have scant occasion or taste for the companionship of other species" (ibid., 5). So what is unsettling about Schwartz is not just his traditional, Old World mien but also the fact that he is forcing Cohen to be in close contact with another species.

enough to share as Malamud seems to, “underscore the moral and existential responsibility for the suffering of others” that all members of a community share.<sup>135</sup> Even if Cohen did not kill Schwartz he did attack him, leave him defenseless, turn his back on him, and throw him out to the anti-Semites, apparently not caring whether or not they killed Schwartz which, in Malamud’s view, means Cohen might as well have done the deed. “Here,” according to Eileen Watts, “the worst anti-Semites are the Jewish ones, who evidently don’t even know who they are.”<sup>136</sup> Another way of putting it is that “the fundamental absurdity of the fable’s story-line precisely parallels the absurd position of the Jewish anti-Semite.”<sup>137</sup> And Malamud seems as though he is cautioning that this is the inevitable result of not only making Judaism and traditional Jews into Things, but then treating those Things not as harmless heirlooms but as something dangerous.

Malamud’s second point about “Jewish self-abuse” has to do with the role of language. Dan Ben-Amos has already described for us the relationship between Jewish humor and language, but there is also a relationship between Jewish identity and language. Sander Gillman writes about the role of language in anti-Semitism in his seminal *Jewish Self-Hatred* and explains the ways in which Jews in Europe, particularly in Germany, were not credited with full use of the language. They may have been speaking German, but they were always thinking, “Jewish” and therefore anything they said or wrote in German was necessarily a lie. This was then played out again in America where the broken and Yiddish-inflected English of the refugee was contrasted, time and

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<sup>135</sup> Rudin, “Malamud’s Jewbird and Kafka’s Gracchus,” 12.

<sup>136</sup> Watts, “Jewish Self-Hatred in Malamud’s ‘The Jewbird,’” 162.

<sup>137</sup> Kevin McCarron, “‘Inhabiting What Remains of Judaism’: Jewishness and Alterity in the Fiction of Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud,” in *Christian-Jewish Relations Through The Centuries*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Brook W. R. Pearson, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series, and Roehampton Institute London Papers (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 288.

again, to the proper American English of the assimilated Jew. As Gillman writes it: “it is the ‘bad’ Jew, the Jew as different, whose language is damaged, who is mute, who is the antithesis of the ‘good’ Jew, the Jew [who speaks] in the cultured language of the West.”<sup>138</sup>

Gillman even goes so far as to say that “the Eastern Jews, the Yiddish-speaking Jews, are inarticulate. They are essentially different. They are animal-like.”<sup>139</sup> This seems to be a large part of Malamud’s portrayal of the way the American Jewish community has treated and is treating their Eastern European counterparts in the story; their lack of facility with English has rendered them less than human, and if, on a communal level they are being treated that way why not represent them as a filthy, freeloading animal in the eyes of people like the Cohens? The greenie in “Eli” was also rendered mute by his inability to communicate in English. As with Roth the bleak picture is of the human condition and the indictment, if there is one, is against a community as a whole. Is Yiddish a separate Thing, or is it a feature of the Judaism-Thing? It could be seen either way in these two stories, but regardless it is clearly a part of the ossified problem. Both Malamud and Roth ultimately side with Kaplan and argue that Jewish culture and Jewish uniqueness must be preserved, and the way to do that is to preserve refugee Jews, even when their traditions make us uncomfortable. This is not a defense of Judaism, per se, but it is a staunch defense of the Jewish people against all enemies, both foreign and domestic.

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<sup>138</sup> Sander Gillman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>139</sup> Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, 328.

### Interlude

Although there is not much to say about Woody Allen's biography that was not covered in the previous discussion of his short stories, there is symmetry at returning to him at the end. Allen has long had a reputation for being hyper-controlling of the creative processes of his films. His big film break came when he was twenty-nine years old and he got a job writing the script for the film *What's New Pussycat*, and while the movie was a success, becoming the highest-grossing comedy to that point in history, Allen was disappointed. He felt as though the finished product was not close enough to the script he wrote and that if they had stuck to his original script it would have been "twice as funny and half as successful."<sup>140</sup> This became the impetus for Allen's future as a filmic control-freak; the "experience taught him that if he was going to write movies, he needed total control of his material."<sup>141</sup> He wanted to be able to translate his vision, and his vision alone, on to the screen. That is part of what makes Allen so good for a study like this one. Despite there being an army of people who go into making a film what it is, Allen has minimized, as much if not more than any other filmmaker, how many people can be credited or blamed for what makes it to the screen. His films represent his vision of the world, and really no one else's.

Religious identity is often in the background of Allen's films, but rarely—if ever—are his films centered on that issue. More often he tosses in an occasional line or image to poke fun at the issue of Jewish identity. Nevertheless, there are two scenes from two of his generally-considered best films that do briefly engage the issue of Jewish

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<sup>140</sup> Lax, *Conversations with Woody Allen*, xi.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

identity in a manner that is both light-hearted on the surface and hints at a more serious opinion underneath. The better-known of the two is the famous Easter scene from *Annie Hall* (1977). Annie has already hinted to Alvy that her Grammy Hall tends a bit towards the anti-Semitic. So when Alvy is finally face-to-face with the matriarch of this WASP clan he is simultaneously existing, awkwardly at the table in reality (“It’s dynamite ham,” he haltingly gushes) and in a fantasy of how Grammy Hall in particular is seeing him. Shots of her scowling face are interspersed with shots of Alvy dressed as a Hassidic Jew complete with a full beard, *payot*, and a traditional black hat. This is a visual representation of both Freud’s joke about the train and the fears of the Jews of Woodenton; you must not show yourself to be “too Jewish” in front of a non-Jewish audience because they will hold it against you. The turning of traditional Old World clothing into a Thing appears again and again in third generation satires, as it is in many ways the most visible sign of Jewishness and therefore is the easiest target. Allen’s approach speaks to the self-censorship that goes on within the Jewish community, and the idea that the *imagined* perception of a Jew by a non-Jew is often much more problematic than the reality of that perception.

The less-often talked about scene comes from *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). The scene is only about a minute long, and it has no dialog but is underscored by a choir singing in Latin. Allen’s character, Mickey, is deeply unhappy and is considering conversion to Catholicism as a solution (he is also considering suicide as a solution, so he is keeping his options open). In this sequence Mickey visits a church during Mass, is given a stack of books to read by a priest, and finally comes home with religion in a bag. We see him unpack first a crucifix, then a gold-leafed text, perhaps a New Testament,



then an icon of a religious figure. Finally, he puts down a loaf of Wonder Bread and a jar of Hellmann's mayonnaise. Not just theoretical Things, but actual things!

Religious foodways have important impact on how American Jewish identity developed. In the post-War period there was such concern over the loss of Jewish identity by assimilated American Jewish children that there was a whole cottage industry of Jewish children's cookbooks to try to counter that loss.<sup>142</sup> The fundamental differences between Jewish and non-Jewish foods have been apparent for a long time. Lenny Bruce, in the mid-1960s, performed a routine called "Jewish and Goyish" in which he listed things, sometimes, unexpected things, that fall into each category. And when it came to food he said: "Kool-Aid is goyish. Evaporated milk is goyish even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime Jell-o is goyish. Lime soda is *very* goyish. All Drake's Cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel is Jewish and, as you know, white bread is very goyish. Instant potatoes, goyish. Black cherry soda's very Jewish, macaroons are *very* Jewish."<sup>143</sup> So by 1964 the ontological non-Jewishness of white bread was something that was so well understood that it would be prefaced with the phrase "as you know." This is why the sight gag works; everything he pulls out of the bag is so immediately recognizable as something a Jew would never have that no dialogue is necessary. The audience gets the joke because in many ways the joke is an old one.

What Allen is doing is more complicated than a simple sight gag, however. Allen is satirizing one of the most enduring statements about Judaism: it is a religion of stuff

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<sup>142</sup> Cf. Rachel Gross, "Draydel Salad: The Serious Business of Food and Fun in the 1950s" in *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, ed. Benjamin E. Zeller, Marie W. Dallam, Reid L. Neilson, and Nora L. Rubel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 91-113.

<sup>143</sup> This was originally performed live, so there are some variation in the transcripts based on slight differences in the way he performed the bit on any given evening. The version I cited comes from *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, ed. William Novak and Moshe Waldoks (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 60.

and action, but not of belief or faith. What he is saying, without saying anything at all, is that of COURSE the Jewish Mickey would think that in order to become a Catholic he needed to acquire the right stuff, from icon to text to food. That is what religion is, right? Religion is a Thing about things. This, perhaps more than any other single example, shows the creation of the Judaism-Thing in the satire of the third generation. Religion is a Thing that comes in a paper bag, and just by owning it a person gains a new identity. You really *are* what you eat. Roth and Malamud express this as well in their depictions of American Jewish dismissal of “Bible stuff” and traditional Jewish forms, but their focus is more on how that rejection of non-functional religious practices leads to a rejection of displaced Jew-Things. Allen brings the focus back to the total materiality of American Jews, and their possibly grotesque misunderstanding of what it means to have a religious identity.

Roth, Malamud, and Allen are all more or less of an age with each other. Malamud was the eldest of the group, but they were all old enough to understand and experience World War II and the stark changes in the Jewish community in the 1950s and 1960s. It stands to reason, therefore, that they would express ideas about religious identity and what the results of sublimating your Jewish identity to the hegemonic majority culture might be that seemed to be prefaced on the relationship between Jews and Judaism-Things, be they language, Old World Jews, or ritual objects. For Roth and Malamud there is the threat of violence; for Allen it results in a loss of direction and a feeling of not belonging. As in the previous chapters, I will conclude with an exemplar of the contemporary generation’s take on Jewish identity and the role of traditional Judaism in that identity negotiation.

### **Jennifer Westfeldt—Background**

Jennifer Westfeldt was born in Connecticut in 1970 is Jewish on her mother's side, and from Swedish nobility on her father's, and though she was raised Jewish and identifies as Jewish, she rarely if ever speaks about her feelings towards Judaism or her Jewish identity. She writes herself non-Jewish roles as often as Jewish ones, but in most of her scripts she includes aspects of interfaith relationships, even when she is portraying the non-Jewish half. As a writer she is similar to Jonathan Tropper in that she tries to show the struggles and foibles of everyday Jews, which for many (if not most) means involvement in interfaith relationships. Although Westfeldt's films generally take place in New York City, as did Allen's earlier films, she is more likely to write a "token" Jewish character into her films and leave the majority of the characters to be, by exclusion, generic American civil religionists. The New York Westfeldt inhabits is centered on places like Greenwich Village or SoHo; areas known for being young, artsy, bohemian, but not necessarily Jewish. Allen's films, on the other hand, were often set in the Upper East Side, an area known for being much more affluent and Jewish. So even Westfeldt's picture of what New York City looks and sounds like is different than Allen's or Malamud's.

Because she does not speak publicly about her private life in anything but the most general terms, it is really only through her writing that we can gain any understanding of her relationship to Judaism. Judaism for Westfeldt seems to be a useful object, but very differently deployed than for the older comedians. For all her similarities to someone like Allen as a filmmaker, she is still very clearly of her generation when it comes to imbuing Judaism with use and function, re-Objectifying and making it no

longer a Thing. Westfeldt, as part of the younger generation of comedians, is responding to the Judaism she inherited, which was already shaped and changed by the third generation, and she is adjusting it to what she believes modern Jews need and want.

Westfeldt is amongst those who grew up with the sociological and psychological concept of “role conflict,” a term unheard of before the 1980s. Role conflict means that you are constantly balancing your multiple identities.<sup>144</sup> At home you may be a wife or a mother. At work you are hierarchically over some people, and subordinate to others. You are a child to your parents and a customer at the grocery store. In every different social interaction, in every different group, your behavior changes, from your language and syntax to your body language and mode of dress. To someone of Westfeldt’s generation a character who acted the same way at all time with all people would seem two-dimensional and not realistic. So her characters express their Judaism differently and at different times than those of the satirists who came before her.

### **Kissing Jessica Stein**

Westfeldt first gained major notoriety with the film *Kissing Jessica Stein*, which she co-wrote with her costar Heather Jurgensen. It is based on their off-Broadway play *Lipschick* which, like *KJS*, is an updated “sex and the single girl” model film, following the dating foibles and failures of a couple of hip young Manhattan professionals.<sup>145</sup>

Westfeldt’s Jessica and Jurgensen’s Helen find each other through the personal ads, and

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<sup>144</sup> Tim Curry, Robert Jiobu, and Kent Schwirian, *Sociology for the Twenty-First Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2008), 144-145.

<sup>145</sup> Kathryn Eastburn, “Sentient Smooch,” *Colorado Springs Independent*, 17 April 2002, online at <<http://www.csindy.com/coloradosprings/sentient-smooch/Content?oid=1114439>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

though neither has previously dated a woman, they hit it off and begin a relationship. And it is through Westfeldt's treatment of Jessica and her family that we can glean some information about how she utilizes—and renormalizes—Judaism in her writing.

The Jewish women in this film say a great deal about Westfeldt's stance on the traditional role of Jewish women in comedy. The characters are “interesting and not stereotypical.”<sup>146</sup> Traditionally there are two things a Jewish woman can be: “the selfless, self-abnegating, overbearing, neurotic Jewish Mother or the materialistic Jewish American Princess (JAP).”<sup>147</sup> A third option is really just a subset of the JAP, “the Jewess [who] is a *zaftig*, awkward, and neurotic brunette, the female counterpart to the *schlemiel*.”<sup>148</sup> Jessica is a new breed of JAP. Westfeldt seems unable to do away with the archetype entirely, but she is willing to explore different dimensions of the JAP.

According to Nathan Abrams, Jessica is:

A neurotic, New York Jewish princess who...is blind to her own privilege... Jessica's *physiognomic* Jewishness is also not immediately apparent. At the same time, she is highly intellectual and defined not just by her ethnicity. The film opens in synagogue, where Jessica is seated between her *kvetching* mother and grandmother during the Yom Kippur service. As the women's voices rise in pitch Jessica exasperatedly shouts “Would you shut up? I'm atoning.” As Michele Byers states, “this opening positions Jessica as a new kind of JAP, one who is fluent in a discourse of moral value seen to be absent from, and unknown to, her foremothers.”<sup>149</sup>

The character of Jessica's best friend, Joan, comes the closest to simply reinforcing old stock characters. Though one review said that the character stayed, “just the right side of

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<sup>146</sup> Karla Mantilla and Jennie Ruby, “Crash Landing for a Promising Lesbian Film,” *Off Our Backs* 32, nos. 7/8 (2002): 57.

<sup>147</sup> Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film*, 43-44.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

caricature,” it is a very fine line that is being walked.<sup>150</sup> Joan is the ugly duckling; the awkward, unattractive sidekick to the pretty but vapid JAP. What saves Joan from being the same tired character (in addition to Jackie Hoffman’s particularly good performance) is that Joan breaks the mold by being, instead of sexless, an enthusiastically sexual creature. First of all she is pregnant, which immediately sets her apart from Jessica and from the typical JAP. Despite there being a direct, biological connection between the JAP and her JAM, the JAP cannot ever truly become a JAM; her upbringing and socio-economic status are too different.<sup>151</sup> So in addition to reproducing, Joan is actually excited about sex where the typical JAP (and Jessica) is frigid. In one scene Joan, “proclaims herself ‘impressed’ that Jessica is sleeping with a partner of the same sex.”<sup>152</sup>

Westfeldt seems to put the most work into rehabilitating the role of the Jewish Mother. Westfeldt has some experience with having a Jewish mother herself, so despite the Jewish mother being one of comedy’s lowest hanging fruits Westfeldt actually treats that character better than some of the others. The Jewish mother may have been one of the first aspects of Jewishness to get made into a Thing in that she became very early on something that was generally undesirable, and she therefore calcified. As one critic put it, however, Westfeldt: “avoided the temptation to turn Jessica Stein's Jewish mother into a stereotypical screaming Jewish mother who freaks when her daughter has a lesbian affair with a non-Jew. Rather, the mother was a multi-dimensional person who sensitively tried

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<sup>150</sup> Lael Loewenstein, “Kissing Jessica Stein,” *Variety*, 7-13 May 2001, online at <<http://variety.com/2001/film/reviews/kissing-jessica-stein-1200468596/>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

<sup>151</sup> Alan Dundes, “The JAP and the JAM in American Jokelore,” *Journal of American Folklore* 98, no. 390 (1985): 468.

<sup>152</sup> Erin Gill, “Reviews: Kissing Jessica Stein,” *Sight and Sound*, July 2002, 46.

to understand what her daughter was going through.”<sup>153</sup> Tovah Feldshuh’s performance as Judy was universally praised, being called “achingly poignant” by one reviewer.<sup>154</sup> The role was written especially for Feldshuh, so she was always the embodiment of what Westfeldt felt she wanted to portray a Jewish Mother to be.<sup>155</sup> Judy is a model of what Abrams calls “the New Jewish Mother,” one who loves her children unconditionally (and equally) no matter what life choices they make.

One of the most insidious aspects of the JAP and JAM stereotypes has been the difficulty in their relationship. The JAM is seen, traditionally, to favor her sons, and many Jewish Mother jokes involve her obsessive pampering and blind worship of her son. Her daughter, on the other hand, was more often a target of her scorn and was seen to be more of a “daddy’s girl.” Just the fact that the mother-daughter relationship in *Kissing Jessica Stein* is fairly positive and Judy does not seem to prefer Jessica’s brother is a major step towards dismantling the JAM stigma.

For all the effort Westfeldt made to rehabilitate the images of Jewish best friends and mothers, she did a less well-received job on her own character. She seems to be trying to make Jessica into the new breed of “gentle JAPs” who are “explicitly identified as smart... [She] is professional, economically comfortable, middle class, well to do, and her parents and family live in suburban affluence.”<sup>156</sup> These things are all true of Jessica, but where the character appears to have fallen short is in “reclaiming Woody Allen

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<sup>153</sup> Nate Bloom, “Interfaith Celebrities,” *Interfaith Family*, April 2007, online at <[http://www.interfaithfamily.com/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/popular\\_culture/Interfaith\\_Celebrities\\_The\\_Long\\_Line\\_of\\_Interfaith\\_Indianas.shtml](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/arts_and_entertainment/popular_culture/Interfaith_Celebrities_The_Long_Line_of_Interfaith_Indianas.shtml)> (accessed 16 June 2013).

<sup>154</sup> Loewenstein, “Kissing Jessica Stein.”

<sup>155</sup> Tovah Feldshuh, interviewed by Chris Neumer, “Tovah Feldshuh Interview,” *Stumped Magazine*, online at <<http://www.stumpedmagazine.com/interviews/tovah-feldshuh/>> (accessed 16 June 2013).

<sup>156</sup> Abrams, *The New Jew in Film*, 52.

territory and swapping the roles of the male *schlemiel* and the JAP.”<sup>157</sup> This caused the character of Jessica to be referred to as: “a highly neurotic single,” the “neurotic Jewish heroine,” and a “Jewish Ally McBeal.”<sup>158</sup> In her attempt to make Jessica something other than the traditional JAP, Westfeldt instead made her so much like her male schlemiel counterpart that she lost some of the dimensionality to the character. If the JAP is a Thing the way the Jewish mother is, then Westfeldt may be trying to reverse the process and make the stereotype no longer a Thing here. But if that is her intention it was not terribly successful. It is not in the re-Objectifying of JAPs that Westfeldt excels, but in the re-Objectifying of Judaism.<sup>159</sup>

If the remaking of Jewish stereotypes was the only aspect of Jewish identity expressed in the film it would be questionable whether it fell under the purview of this dissertation. There is, however, a deeper analysis of what it means to be a Jew in twenty-first century America going on throughout the film, making it a natural analog to Roth and Malamud. There is a different sort of irreverence to the way Judaism is used in *Kissing Jessica Stein* than in, for example, Joseph Heller’s work. Westfeldt is not doing halakhic midrash as much as some sort of modern aggadah. Where halakhic midrash

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<sup>157</sup> Ruth D. Johnston, “Joke-Work: The Construction of Jewish Postmodern Identity in Contemporary Theory and American Film,” in *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, ed. Vincent Brook (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 216.

<sup>158</sup> Rose Capp, “Single White Female Seeking Same: The Search for Sisterhood in *Kissing Jessica Stein* and *The Banger Sisters*,” *Senses of Cinema* 23 (December 2002), online at <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/sisterhood/>>; Lowenstein, “Kissing Jessica Stein.”

<sup>159</sup> There is another whole critical conversation that has to do with Jessica’s sexuality. It is not directly under the purview of this chapter, but it bears noting that it has been criticized for the fact that “like nearly all lesbian stories written for mainstream consumption, at least one potential lesbian must find out that being with a man is really for her, reinforcing the stereotypes that lesbian love is only “practice” for the real thing with a man and that only one woman in a lesbian relationship is the ‘real’ lesbian” (Mantilla and Ruby, “Crash Landing for a Promising Lesbian Film,” *Off Our Backs*, 57; see also Lisa Blackman, “The Re-Making of Sexual Kinds: Queer Subjects and the Limits of Representation,” *The Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13, no. 2 [2009]: 122-135; and Lisa Diamond, “‘I’m Straight, but I Kissed a Girl’: The Trouble with American Media Representations of Female-Female Sexuality,” *Feminism & Psychology* 15, no. 1 [2005]: 104-110).



sprang first and foremost from the legal portions of scripture, aggadah was folkier, more homiletic. Aggadah was the way religious thinkers related Judaism to life in a non-legalistic, sometimes even non-biblical way. Westfeldt is painting a word picture of what it means to be a single Jewish woman in twenty-first century New York. And to Westfeldt, what it means is that you have, first and foremost, a mother and a grandmother breathing down your neck to find a nice Jewish boy and get married. You have to be wise-cracking and neurotic, simultaneously well-dressed and awkward. And finally you have a social circle full of both nominal Jews and non-Jews, (or perhaps perceptual and conceptual Jews) all of whom express Jewish stereotypes more than they embody Jewish practice. Westfeldt's work, on the surface, is exactly what critics like Allen Guttman were talking about when they argued that this type of comedy was not actually Jewish at all, it was simply done by Jews.

When one looks a little deeper at the film, however, one finds that this is not strictly true. As mentioned, the film opens with the Stein family at synagogue for Yom Kippur. Though the dialogue is light-hearted, the liturgy is rendered in its traditional form and it is the Steins who are being mocked in the scene, not the Judaism. Similarly, when the family gathers for Shabbat dinner at the Stein home in Scarsdale, Jessica sings the Kiddush, her co-worker Josh sings a lovely motzi, and despite the rapid-fire, almost farcical scene happening around the table when the blessings are being sung everything else stops for a moment, and all attention is focused on the prayer. This is a direct inversion of the third generation's patterns, as we saw in *Englander* and *Tropper* as well. Throw Jews under the bus if you please, but save a little respect for Judaism.

In synagogue, at Shabbat dinner, and at Jessica's brother's wedding *tallits* and *yarmulkes* abound. The clothing that was such a problem in Woodenton and in the Cohen apartment is now on display as a part of a normal American Jewish life. It was important to Westfeldt that the Stein family be proudly and observantly Jewish because that orientation guides the development of the characters, but every time there was an easy joke opportunity to use the family's Jewish identity as a punchline she pulled back. In fact, at the pivotal moment at the rehearsal dinner when Jessica appears to be struggling with how to finally tell her mother about Helen, rather than falling back on stereotyped reactions her mother simply chokes back her tears and tells Jessica "I think she's a very nice girl," not making Jessica say the words at all. This scene is highlighted in many of the discussions of the film, having been called both "poignant but unsentimental," as well as an especially "memorable scene."<sup>160</sup> Overcoming stereotypes is, of course, a worthy goal on its own. But Westfeldt's desire to overcome stereotypes *through* religious rituals and liturgical events sets it apart as being concerned with a religious Jewish identity above and beyond any ethnic or cultural Jewishness. Here Judaism very much has a use, which makes it the furthest thing from a Thing. This is the renormalizing of Jewish identity that Westfeldt is attempting, and this is the reshaping of the audience's moral universe that Adler spoke of. In Westfeldt's world the funniest thing about Jews can actually be something *other* than Judaism. What a concept.

*Kissing Jessica Stein* does double duty. Like Heller, Westfeldt woven traditional Jewish elements into her screenplay not as a joke, but as the humanizing antidote to the joke. When the stereotypes of young New York become almost overbearing, she reverts

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<sup>160</sup> Erin Gill, "Reviews: Kissing Jessica Stein," 46.; Eastburn, "Sentient Smooch."

to a moment of quiet prayer or piety to remind the viewer that these are real people, not just walking joke factories. In dramatic works we are familiar with the concept of “comic relief.” Writers have known for centuries that an audience cannot feel pathos for hours on end; they eventually grow numb and the denouement of the drama loses its punch. So, comic relief. Include a comic scene, or song, or character to break up the dramatic action, allowing the audience to breathe before the final push. Comedy works similarly. It is hard to maintain laughter for hours on end. Stand-up comedy sets are rarely more than an hour long. So Westfeldt uses internal, personal moments of religious ritual as a sort of “dramatic relief”; as the pause that refreshes. She gives the audience a chance to catch their breath before the next farcical scene. Jessica’s role conflict means that she is not displaying Judaism at all times with all people, but at the same time, if you removed all the prayers and liturgical moments from the film, you would still have something generally identifiable as “Jewish humor” because of Jessica’s neuroses, sarcasm, and verbal wit. This is what Mel Brooks meant when he said Jewish humor was just urban, just New York, and this is the type of humor Guttman had in mind when he said there was no religion in Jewish humor. But that humor is not all there is to the film. Westfeldt understood that the film needed the religious aspects to save it from being precisely the kind of caricature Guttman accused it of being.

### **Conclusion**

Religious identity is a favorite topic for satirists because it is very often the very thing they are trying to satirize. Whether it is the complicated relationship between assimilated and immigrant Jews in America, Jewish identity vs. non-Jewish identity, or what it means

to be a Jewish woman in the twenty-first century and how those characters who have been drawn so easily by male comedians for decades can be re-worked by a younger generation of female comedians, religious identity and the way it colors almost all aspects of a person's life is something at which many satirists have aimed their mockery. In an America increasingly unmarked by the traditional identifiers of Jewish identity such as accent, neighborhood, or profession the need to define what the American Jewish experience is becomes an almost generational imperative. Writers and filmmakers continue to nuance and alter what being an American Jew is based on their personal experience. Judaism and the things that mark you as a Jew were Things in the third generation and are alive in the contemporary generation. Jewishness meant different things to Roth, Malamud, and Allen as regards interpersonal and intergroup relationships than it does to Westfeldt.

Roth's view of Jewish identity as being defined by visibility and invisibility (or surplus visibility) reflected the disdain he felt for comfortable American apathy and suburban assimilation, while Malamud went a step further and showed that Jewish fear over exposure and a loss of place in society could even result in inter-Jewish rejection and violence. While Roth's metaphor is darkness and blackness Malamud's asks the question of who is the real animal in the Cohen-Schwartz relationship. Glenn Meeter compared "Eli, the Fanatic" with "The Jewbird" by arguing that, "in both stories those who refuse their Jewish heritage refuse it with a kind of faith."<sup>161</sup> Meeter nearly predicted Thing Theory with this analysis. The faith in "America" or "assimilation" or "equality" supplanted and overtook faith in Judaism in these representations of the third generation.

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<sup>161</sup> Glenn Meeter, *Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud: A Critical Essay*, Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective, ed. Rod Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 19-20.

Judaism, then, became obsolete as the new faith assured people of a place in the Promised Land (Westchester County).

Allen on the other hand expresses his satire of the materiality of American Jews and the resulting absolute dissolution of Judaism into Judaism-as-Thing. He sees the continued need to find religion as resulting in a desire to possess religion. The right things cannot give you a new religion because religion itself *is* the Thing. And Westfeldt takes all of those ideas about what it means to be an American Jew and, while not rejecting them, shapes them into something that is still instantly recognizable as being in the lineage of those who came before her (especially Allen) but nevertheless turns Judaism-as-Thing back into Judaism-as-functional object.

Though less tied to a specific aspect of Judaism than the foregoing discussions of both text and ritual, satire of Jewish identity is a more holistic approach to religious critique. As seen in Roth and Westfeldt—and to a lesser extent Malamud—Jewish identity is defined by one's relationship to text, ritual, liturgy, and practice. Eli felt that in putting on the Hasidic garb and greeting his neighbors with a hearty "Shalom!" he had become a "real" Jew. We know Jessica is Jewish not because she wears or says something specific, but because we see her practicing Judaism; she attends Yom Kippur services, she sings in Hebrew at Shabbat dinner. Schwartz is a danger to Cohen because he prays, he *davens*, he speaks Yiddish. Schwartz's ritual actions mark him as other than what Cohen wants a modern American Jew to be, and he must therefore be fought, even violently, to neutralize the danger. Even Allen's short scene is speaking to the problem that Jewish identity is too often associated with things *other* than actions. Westfeldt's Jews are marked by participation in Jewish life precisely because, a generation before,

Allen pointed out that Jews had begun to see religious affiliation as simply a matter of having the right stuff. In the conclusion I will tie all of these elements and satiric approaches to Judaism, as well as offering a thesis about the way satire itself has become a ritualized, potentially religious act in the twenty-first century.

## CONCLUSION

Humor experts say there are seven jokes; the rest are variation of the paradigms. Jews have three extra?

In Israel they have seven jokes; in the Diaspora we observe the other three — four if it's a leap year.

-Andrew Silow-Carrell<sup>490</sup>

By now I have worked through a great variety of satiric works, diverse in their aims, their scopes, and their context. What I hope has become apparent is that Jewish satire is a rich vein to mine for information about the evolution of Jewish American culture and the way Jews have both thought about and projected Jewishness. Jewish culture in America is no more monolithic or stable than any only American culture. We as a nation, and we as individual subgroups all change over time and in response to the major social and political catalysts to which we are exposed. In the case of American Jewish culture, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it may be trite to say that World War II was one of the most substantial catalysts that initiated cultural change.

There are myriad reasons why American Jewish culture changed after World War II, which all fold in on each other. After the war Jews began moving out of the cities and into the suburbs. That change in zip code also caused a change in congregational dynamics, as it was no longer a given that you would live near a synagogue and attending

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<sup>490</sup> Andres Silow-Carrell, interviewed by Steve Lipman, “4,000 Years, 10 Jokes: Jewish History Is Like the Waiter Who Asks a Table Full of Retired Ladies, ‘Is Anything All Right?’” *The Jewish Weekly*, 4 November 2014, online at <<http://www.thejewishweek.com/features/jw-qa/4000-years-10-jokes>> (accessed 11 March 2015).

religious services and rituals became something that, while still common for most Jews, took an increasing amount of effort. Jewish Community Centers began to grow as an alternative and a way of bringing Jews together as a group when they no longer lived in ethnic enclaves, but that also caused greater denominational mixing. Synagogue attendance rose dramatically and the modern Jewish Sunday School was developed as a way to combat the loss of Jewish identity Baby Boom children were expected to undergo.<sup>491</sup> Furthermore, refugees and other people displaced by the war caused American Jews to face often uncomfortable choices about how to best help their impoverished and traumatized coreligionists without jeopardizing the hard won equality they had only recently begun to enjoy. Not one of these factors on its own explains how or why Jewish culture changed in the 1950s and 1960s, but together they begin to form a picture of the vast number of forces that were pushing on American Jews.

Rather than looking at the impact of various cultural forces on Jewish society as a whole, which has been done and done well many times, in this dissertation I have focused on one way of tracking the societal changes. By looking at the satire produced by the men (in this case) who experienced these changes, who were born before the war and therefore saw American Jewish culture change dramatically from one model to another in a very short period of time, it is possible to form some conclusions about the way that generation felt about and treated Judaism as well as the Jewish people as a whole. A close reading of the major satirists of the third generation does not in and of itself argue anything about the evolution of Jewish American culture that we did not already know.

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<sup>491</sup> Glazer, *American Judaism*, 119.



But it does offer a new way of viewing established trends and changes, and a set of texts that were helping to shape a generation that have not previously been used in this way.

The two new things this dissertation does propose is the application of Bill Brown's Thing Theory to American Jewish satire and an analysis of very contemporary twenty-first century satire, not only on its own but in relation to the satires that came before it. Brown's theory has been largely used as a way of thinking about the life of material objects. Applying it to ephemeral concepts such as "Judaism" or "Jewishness" took it in a new direction. As for twenty-first century satire, it is only 2015. It is too early to draw conclusions about the state of the art as a whole. Because I am dealing generationally, however, there is enough material to usefully compare the contemporary satire to Baby Boom and third generation satire, and that is what I have done.

Satire is an underutilized resource. Because it is related to humor it gets overlooked as a source for cultural information. But the nature of satire is so engaged with reality and with the world as the satirist sees it that it actually acts sort of like amber, preserving snapshots of a cultural moment that we can look at years later. Although satire presents an ever-mediated view of reality, it does always remain anchored in its contemporary surroundings which allows us to pull from it attitudes toward aspects of the society producing it. Satire does not need to present "truth," it simply needs to represent "now" for whenever it was written. From there it becomes a question of interpretation and how the satire is received and read by its own audience, and by subsequent generations.

In each chapter I have offered a different aspect of Jewish American satire and the way that Thing Theory allows us to extrapolate from the words on a page or images on a

screen to a larger argument about how the satirists were interacting with Judaism and Jewishness. In the opening chapter I formulated the broad frameworks of Humor Theory and Thing Theory. The combination of those two theoretical models offers a potent analytical tool. Humor Theory, rooted as it is in both individual and group psychology, can tell us a great deal about why we laugh and at what we laugh. So much of the success of humor (and by extension humorous satire) is about establishing group boundaries. Humor establishes an in-group and an out-group, and by laughing at a joke you show you are part of the in-group. It can unite a community in that way because, as will be discussed at greater length in a moment, the in-group/out-group boundary can become the appreciation of a whole oeuvre instead of a single joke.

When that community-building psychological aspect of the art form itself is brought together with a Thing Theoretical analysis of the subject matter some remarkable trends begin to emerge. Applying Thing Theory specifically to the way that aspects of organized religion and traditional Judaism are depicted in satire shows a change over time that correlates strongly to the larger changes in American Jewish society I delineated above. Thing Theory says that once an object no longer works or has outlived its original function it becomes a Thing. That theory articulates nicely what was done to religion (and specifically Judaism) in the satires of the third generation. The 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in anti-establishment and anti-authority rhetoric across the board, and when that combined with the suburbanization and bourgeoisization of American Jews satirists were in a perfect position to depict Judaism as a Thing; as far as these satires are concerned American Jews, in their race to Westchester County, dropped Judaism by the side of the road and never looked back.

In chapter two I focused on satires of scripture. Both of the representatives of the third generation, Woody Allen and Joseph Heller, used satire to try to undermine what they saw as an overly-pious reverence for scripture. Their agendas seem to have been different—Allen has always been vocally opposed to the abuses he sees as the fault of organized religion as a whole while Heller simply wanted to humanize King David and remind us that the Bible is full of people and not just morals—but both men took scripture out of the hands of religion and reimagined, even mocked them in order to remove the patina of awe. They make scripture into a Thing by depicting it as ridiculous, manipulative, falsified, or misguided. The argument seems to be “this text does not have the value traditionally ascribed to it, so wake up and move on!” What these texts do not seem to be making into Things, however, are Jews. Especially in Allen the sense is that Judaism is some crime that is being perpetuated against the Jewish people.

When those satires are compared to the way Nathan Englander used scripture for satiric ends in 2012 a very different picture emerges. Englander uses scripture as the canvas for making his ethical arguments, instead of setting it up as the Thing against which he is arguing. If scripture is being used in a positive way it means it once again *has* use. Englander has re-Objectified scripture. In Englander’s story scripture helps to set our moral compass so it is very much alive and functional and is an object once again. In Englander’s story the conflict comes from the Jews themselves, which shows his satiric object as being diametrically opposed to those of the third generation. The third generation protected Jews at the expense of Judaism and Englander is protecting Judaism at the expense of (or even *from*) Jews.

Chapter three continued to build this argument that had now emerged about the differences between third generation and contemporary satires. In this chapter I examined satires that used rituals, ritual performers, and life cycle events as their satiric foci. In this chapter the Baby Boom generation took over for the third generation. Because of the making of Judaism into a Thing in the third generation very few of their satires engage with ritual in a meaningful way; Jews-without-Judaism do not really participate in rituals, so those were not a particular focus of the third generation. The Baby Boom generation did provide several examples, as well as providing an opportunity to look at the generational bridge between the third generation and the contemporary one. The Baby Boomers appears to follow the same pattern as the generations that bookend them; the earlier a satire was the more it mirrored the third generation process of making Jewish ritual into a Thing. Baby Boom satires from the twenty-first century much more closely resembled the satire of the contemporary generation. So while *Saturday Night Live* and *Seinfeld* used rituals to show the ineffectiveness of rabbis and *mohels*, as well as the commercialization and hypocrisy of Jewish ritual to a modern, enlightened Jew the Coen Brothers' *A Serious Man* showed the rabbinate (if not all rabbis) as being a valuable calling and ritual as being something that can heal a family. The Coen Brothers' bar mitzvah scene appeared more closely related to contemporary satirist Jonathan Tropper's funeral in *This is Where I Leave You* than to any of their third generation progenitors. To third generation-leaning Baby Boomers ritual is farcical and meaningless; to contemporary satirists and contemporary-leaning Baby Boomers ritual has the power to heal and to bring people together.

Finally, in chapter four I examined satires that deal with the topic of Jewish identity. Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud are arguably the key figures in third generation satire, and they both wrote short stories about the hypocrisy they saw in post-war Jewish society and the way that hypocrisy made these newly bourgeois Jews unable to handle the presence of Eastern European refugees. They both recognize the Thing-making—and abandonment—of Judaism by post-war Jews, but instead of perpetuating it like Allen and Heller they point a finger at it as problematic. Jews who have lost their Judaism, their stories seem to say, are empty inside and unable to relate to Jews who are more traditional, and who may threaten their tenuous hold on middle class civility. Woody Allen appears again in this chapter, where his short scene from *Hannah and Her Sisters* offers biting satire of what he sees as a failing in Jewish identity, namely that it is too focused on material objects. Jews think being religious is about owning the right stuff, which to Allen is one more reason why Judaism itself is a Thing to be set aside and abandoned.

Jennifer Westfeldt's *Kissing Jessica Stein* is the contemporary counterpoint in this chapter, and she more than any other contemporary satirists examined demonstrates the way that Judaism has been re-Objectified in contemporary works. For her, Judaism functions as the thing that makes her characters human as opposed to being caricatures. Rather than religious practice being a character flaw the way it appeared in chapter two, religious practice is what reminds us that these otherwise over-the-top people have feelings and are well-rounded. In this chapter I formulate the idea of “dramatic relief” as an analogue to comedic relief. Humor theorists argue that we cannot laugh for long stretches because eventually we reach a saturation point and fall back to just chuckling or

smiling. So if a filmmaker wants to keep the laughs rolling she needs to give the audience serious moments to cleanse their palate, so to speak. Fully-formed people, in Westfeldt's world, can go from secular social interactions to prayer and piety easily because both are part of what makes them who they are. Judaism is *highly* functional in *Kissing Jessica Stein*, and even more than in Englander, The Coen Brothers, or Tropper we see the ways in which it is rehabilitated and re-energized by contemporary satires. David, late in Heller's *God Knows*, says "I want my God back," and that seems to be what contemporary satirists said as well. "I want my Judaism back."

I want to propose one more analysis of what is being done with satire in the contemporary generation. An argument can be made that the consumption of satire itself has taken on ritual dimensions for present-day American Jews. Ronald Grimes speaks of something he calls the "theatre-ritual nexus," and claims that this nexus "has been more frequently and more fully explored than that of ritual and any of the other arts" by which he means things such as music and dance.<sup>492</sup> What is it that separates a performance from a ritual? If it is the intent of the performer, then we are making strong claims to know what is inside the hearts and minds of every religious or spiritual functionary. If they are having a bad day, if they are preoccupied, if they are phoning it in, or if they do not even believe anymore does their ritual action cease to be ritual and become theatre? History has shown that leaving the validity of a ritual up to the individual performer is problematic, so we cannot use that as our determinant.<sup>493</sup> So if the intent of the ritual

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<sup>492</sup> Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, Oxford Ritual Studies Series, ed. Ronald Grimes, Ute Husken, and Eric Venbrux (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 223.

<sup>493</sup> This was, of course, one of the major things to come out of the Donatist schism in the early Church; the decision was made that it was the office that made a ritual valid, not the person holding the office.

performer is not what determines whether an action is ritual or theatre, perhaps the onus lies with the audience.

David Cole, as mentioned above, argues that theatre lends itself to ritual, and ritual lends itself to theatre because theatre is “an opportunity to experience imaginative life as physical presence.”<sup>494</sup> Using Cole’s analysis, it is the audience’s experience that makes theatre ritualistic because theatre makes physical and visible things that otherwise only exist in the audience’s mind. So theatre, meaning also movies and television, can accomplish wonders. The easiest example is to think of the look on a child’s face when she first experiences a movie or television show. Those characters and stories are incredibly real to her, and they have a huge impact on her understanding of her world. But adults do not believe the performers are actually the characters, so can this comparison be made? Yes, it can be. Ritual, both generally and in Judaism, structures time. Life cycle rituals such as those under discussion in this chapter mark the chronology of a person’s life, but there are rituals to also mark the change in seasons, the end of a week, the beginning of a month, or a particular time of day. It is through ritual that time is made meaningful, and ritual therefore undergirds our understanding of the world as adults just as much as a favorite Disney movie does for a child.

Using *Seinfeld* as an example, people have reported that family viewings of *Seinfeld* formed an important part of their time-marking. One person reported that, “in my home, we had a very strict family dinner and *Seinfeld* routine.”<sup>495</sup> Every evening the

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<sup>494</sup> Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 224.

<sup>495</sup> This was reported to me both orally and in classroom work by many people over the years, but this particular example comes from a young man I met in Florida who held *Seinfeld* in particular regard for the place it occupied in his family life. But Woody Allen films are also a common example of ritualizing the consumption of art.

family came together to eat dinner and watch *Seinfeld*, and in his words, the things that defined him as “an American Jew” were going to synagogue, attending Hebrew School, keeping kosher, making daily calls to his *Bubbie*, and *Seinfeld*. In his mind, and in his understand of what it means to be a Jew in America, watching and enjoying *Seinfeld* is a ritual and defining act. And he is not alone in this. The massive 2013 Pew Survey on American Jewry found that basically the same number of American Jews thought having a good sense of humor was essential to their Jewish identity (42%) as was concern for Israel (43%).<sup>496</sup> Using Durkheim’s definition of religion being what unites us around special things, humor becomes a religious dimension of Jewishness. Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David, and Larry Charles may not have been intending to create something with ritual significance, but as we have seen, historically the performer is secondary to the audience’s experience. And if daily viewings of *Seinfeld* mark a liminal time, a special time, a time set apart then it is difficult not to see that as a ritual act. *Seinfeld* and SNL both used ritual and could potentially *be* ritual, but they also both performed Judaism or Jewishness in a way that privileged culture over tradition. It is perhaps too early to have a real answer to whether this phenomenon is actually taking place, but current evidence indicates it may be. If that is the case, then by the dawn of the twenty-second century we should have developed a semi-ritual appreciation of satire, at least among American Jews, that will sit somewhere in between other new rituals like Miriam’s Cup at Passover or Chinese food on Christmas. The viewing of a new film by whomever is the most visible satirist could take on elements of holiday or pilgrimage observances, while Jewish book clubs could carry weight similar to Torah study groups.

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<sup>496</sup> Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of American Jews,” 1 October 2013, online at <<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>> (accessed 5 March 2015).



Viewing the appreciation of Jewish satire as a ritual in and of itself does not, of course, answer the question of whether Judaism is still a Thing, or not a Thing, or a Thing-in-transition. If satire is a ritual and ritual retains its role as something that structures and defines a Jew's life, then that certainly makes a case for Judaism being alive and useful, and therefore not a Thing. But if the function of traditional Jewish rituals has been supplanted by these new rituals, then it is much more difficult to discern what that says about Jewish Thing status. Luckily, the aim of this dissertation was not to determine the state of Judaism in America or prognosticate its future. I have offered only one small contribution to the massive and growing scholarly discussion of American Judaism. I believe that my reading of the differences between the way Judaism was presented in the third generation and the way it is presented in the contemporary generation is valuable as a way of framing the way several generations of American Jews felt (or were told to feel) about Judaism. And Thing Theory is an indispensable tool for breaking down cultural forms, whether material or intellectual. Cultural artifacts of all kinds can be Things or not, and works of satire are most assuredly cultural artifacts. It seems fitting to end with a final joke, which I have always felt sums up the changing relationship between Judaism, culture, and what we consider ritual:

A congregant approaches the rabbi with a grave dilemma, "Rabbi, you know how big a Yankee fan I am, what should I do on Wednesday, come to services or watch the playoff game?" The Rabbi replies, "David, that is exactly the reason for the invention of DVRs." To which David replies, "Thanks Rabbi, I didn't realize you could record Kol Nidre services!"

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### **Education**

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1997-2001      *Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA*  
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### **Areas of Specialization**

Religion in America  
American Judaism  
Religion and Popular Culture

### **Areas of Competency**

New Religious Movements  
Indigenous Religions  
Sociology of Religion

### **Research Interests**

Dissertation:  
"All Joking Aside: The role of religion in American Jewish satire"

Advisor: Professor Zachary Braiterman  
First Reader: Professor Ken Frieden

Comprehensive Exams (At Syracuse we do exams of our choice in 4 set areas):

Person: Vine Deloria Jr.

Movement: Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidism

Text: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

Problem: Stereotype Reclamation in American Judaism

### **Teaching Experience**

*Wesleyan University*

Visiting Assistant Professor

RELI 204: Judaism(s): Religion, Power, & Identity in Jewish Hist. (Fall 2015)

RELI 214: Jewish Graphic Novels (Fall 2015)

RELI 201: Hebrew Bible (Spring 2016)

RELI 300: American Jewish Humor (Spring 2016)

*Western Illinois University*

## Visiting Instructor

REL 492(G): Religion, Literature, and Film (Spring 2015)

REL 101: Exploring Religion (Fall 2014)

REL 111: Western Religions (Fall 2014, Spring 2015)

*Rollins College*

## Visiting Assistant Professor

REL 217: Jewish Life and Thought (Spring 2014)

REL 251: American Jewish Humor (Spring 2014)

REL 333: Modern and Contemporary Jewish Thought (Spring 2014)

REL 251: Religion and the Human Condition: NRMs and Society  
(Intersession, 2014)

REL 125: Hebrew Bible (Fall 2013)

REL 135: Religion in America (Fall 2013)

REL 251: Jews and Comic Books (Fall 2013)

*Syracuse University*

## Instructor:

REL 100/JSP 100: Judaism and Humor (Fall 2012)

REL 135/JSP 135: Judaism (Spring 2012, Spring 2013)

REL 100: Religions in America (Fall 2011)

REL 320/JSP 300: American Jewish Humor (Fall 2010)

## Section Leader:

REL 103: Religion and Sports (Spring 2010)

## Teaching Assistant:

REL 114: The Bible (Spring 2012)

REL 135: Judaism (Fall 2011, Fall 2012)

REL 131: Great Jewish Writers (Spring 2009, 2011)

REL 335: Israelis and Palestinians in Lit. &amp; Film (Fall 2008, 2010)

REL 205: Ancient Greek Religion (Fall 2009)

*Wells College*

## Instructor:

RELG 263: The Hebrew Bible and Jewish Tradition (Spring 2013)

RELG 100: Gods and Creation (Fall 2012)

RELG 275: Introduction to Asian Religions (Fall 2012)

*Sinclair Community College*

## Online Instructor

REL 111: Eastern Religions (2009-2013)

REL 112: Western Religions (2009-2013)

## On-Campus Instructor:

REL 111: Eastern Religions (2004-2008)  
 REL 112: Western Religions (2004-2008)  
 REL 135: American Religious Movements (2004-2008)  
 HUM 255: People and Religion (2004, 2006)

### **Publications**

(Under Review, Rowman & Littlefield) "American Jewish Culture" (Chapter) in *Interpreting American Jews*. Avi Decter, Ed.

(Forthcoming, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization) "The Nebbish in Popular Culture Or, Why We Still Root For The Underdog" (Chapter) in *Jewish Cultural Studies* series. Simon Bronner and Caspar Battegay, Eds.

"'Well At MY Temple in Scarsdale...': Teaching Beyond the 'Heritage Student' in Three Institutions." *Shofar* 32.4, Summer 2014

"Baal Sham Tov: Woody Allen's Hassidic Tale Telling." *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 42.3, September 2013

### **Conference Presentations**

2015 "Tza'ar Ba'alei Chayim? Jews as Predators and Prey in the Zombie Apocalypse": *American Academy of Religion Annual Conference*, Atlanta, GA

2015 "Bird, Man, and Superman: animality, humanity, and superhumanity in Jewish graphic novels": *Frames: Jewish Culture and the Comic Book*, Princeton, NJ

2014 "I Am Only a Cat: Images of Humanity and Animality in Jewish Graphic Novels": *American Academy of Religion Annual Conference*, San Diego, CA

2014 "The Nebbish Spectrum": *Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference*, Baltimore, MD

2014 "I am Them, They Are Me: The Unassimilable Other in Roth and Malamud": *American Academy of Religion-Southeastern Commission For the Study of Religion*, Atlanta, GA

2013 Roundtable Discussion: "Translating the Jewish Narrative into an American Narrative": *Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference*, Boston, MA

2012 "Jewbird Singing in the Dead of Night: Animal Fables in Jewish Satire and Self-Critique": *Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference*, Chicago, IL

2011 "Civil Religion in a Brave New World": *American Academy of Religion Annual Conference*, San Francisco, CA

2010 "Religious Conversion Through the Music of Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, and Cat Stevens": *American Academy of Religion-Southwestern Region*, Dallas, TX

2010 "Portrayals of Jesus in Musical Theatre": *American Academy of Religion Southwestern Region*, Dallas, TX

2010 "But He's Our Nebbish: Stereotype in the Films of Woody Allen": *International Society for Religion, Literature, and Culture Biennial*, Oxford, England

2009 "Jesus in Modern Theatre": *Hawai'i International Conference on Arts and Humanities*, Honolulu, HI

2009 "Native Americans in Comic Books": *American Academy of Religion-Eastern International Region*, Syracuse, NY

### **Invited Lectures**

2014: "Funny Ladies: Pioneering Women of Jewish Humor," Macomb Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Macomb, IL

2014: "Sarah Laughed: The Genesis of Jewish Humor," Georgetown University, Washington, DC

2013: "What's Jewish About Jewish Humor," Rollins College, Winter Park, FL

2013: "American Jewish Thought: Kaplan, Heschel, and Soloveitchik," a three-part series, Temple Concord, Syracuse, NY

2012-13: "American Jewish Satire: Woody Allen, Philip Roth, and the Coen Brothers," a three-part series, Temple Concord, Syracuse, NY

### **Service**

2014-15 Philosophy & Religious Studies Recruitment Committee, Western Illinois University

2013 Fulbright Interview Committee, Rollins College

2013 Presider: *The American Academy of Religion Annual Conference*, Baltimore, MD

2013 Session Chair: "The Monstrous, the Marginalized, and Transgressive forms of 'Humanity'", Syracuse, NY

2011-13 Adult Hebrew Instructor, Temple Concord, Syracuse, NY

2011 Session Chair: *American Academy of Religion-Eastern International Region*, Syracuse, NY  
 2011 Session Chair: *Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts*, Syracuse, NY  
 2011-12 Admissions Representative: *Religion Graduate Organization*  
 2010-11 Co-President: *Religion Graduate Organization*  
 2004-08 Religious School Educator, Temple Israel, Dayton, OH

### **Honors and Awards**

2012 and 2013 Selection Teaching Mentor Program  
 2012 Certificate of University Teaching  
 2010-2011, 2008-2009 Benjamin Fellowship in Judaic Studies  
 2010 Induction Theta Chi Beta, Religion Honor Society  
 2001 Jacqueline Krieger Klein Fellowship in Jewish Studies

### **Professional Memberships**

American Academy of Religion  
 Association for Jewish Studies  
 International Society for Religion, Literature, and Culture  
 British Sociological Association  
 American Jewish Historical Association

### **Language Competencies**

Biblical Hebrew: Medium proficiency  
 French: Medium proficiency  
 German: Basic proficiency

### **References**

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